

the starkness of it

**ASHOK MITRA**

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# the starkness of it **ASHOK MITRA**



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Lotus Collection

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*The Starkness of It*

is humbly dedicated to the memory of

Charles Francis D'Mello

whom I had never met, but who thought my 'Calcutta Diary' column  
made his day – so he told his son.

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▼

These essays selected from the 'Calcutta Diary' column, appearing in the *Economic and Political Weekly* over the years 1986 to 1993, owed their origin to the gentle persuasion of Krishna Raj. He edited the journal for the span of three and a half decades with great imagination and made it what it is today. His death in 2004 has taken away the flavour of life for many of us.

I must also remember the enthusiasm for these pieces on the part of Padma Prakash, who held an important editorial position in the journal during that period.

Bernard D'Mello, currently deputy editor of the *EPW*, who, for weeks on end, stayed back after office hours, trudged through old issues of the journal, and put together the selection; I cannot thank him enough.

Finally, two friends from different spheres, Prabhat Patnaik and M.J. Akbar, have been ardent readers of whatever I wrote. They will perhaps feel hurt if I try to thank them.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Starkness of It* is a selection culled out from the essays which formed the corpus of the now defunct fortnightly 'Calcutta Diary' column in the *Economic and Political Weekly*; these were written in the corridor of time between February 1986, when the author had just vacated one political position, and August 1993, when he took up another.

Some might describe this collection as an exercise in literary archaeology not really worth the effort. They of course would have their reasons. The country and, along with the country, the world, they could argue, have changed beyond recognition in the past decade and a half. Issues occupying centrestage when these essays were written have, it could be suggested, faded into insignificance, and are at best of interest only to those vulnerable to a certain genre of nostalgia. Others might be even more forthright: these pieces, they would say, not only not make pleasant reading; they are written in a prose that is excessively vitriolic.

It is easier to cope with the latter charge. When the ambience is uncouth, it is difficult to take care of manners. The present writer therefore does not pretend to feel particularly apologetic, even *ex post*, at the use of strong language in some of the essays. In the final analysis, the issue is one of a point of view; one does not have to call a spade a shovel; a spade should still be revealed in its own identity.

The more important question that could be posted with respect to *The Starkness of It* concerns its over-all thematic relevance at this juncture. Have not the parameters of the debate transformed in the past fifteen years? Have they really? True, in many spheres of life and living, changes have been of a breathtaking nature, quantity has moulded into quality, India now stands ramrod against a globalised landscape, with promises of emerging soon as an economic superpower. There is little point going overboard though. The endeavours at liberalizing the economy had in fact started in the early 1980s. While the ruling party was even then the Indian National Congress, it had already moved out of the spell of the legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru, and was putty clay in the hands of his two grandsons, who took charge of the polity one after another. While its formal announcement was delayed till July 1991, the process of wholesale globalization was actually on for a number of years. Import substitution had been discarded as the prime objective of official policy; the intent to cross over to the modality of export-led growth was fairly evident. Admittedly, it was still a period of groping around, with the quest continuing for a profitable export sector. That quest finally met with noteworthy success in the early years of the new millennium. What emerged was not the phenomenon of an export boom of any commodity or any range of commodities. It was, instead, the bonanza of a particular service activity. Outsourcing by several Western countries and Japan of Information Technology enabled services has led to a galloping increase in the country's export earnings. The break with the past has coincided with the iconic role currently being played by the Information Technology sector. Less than 1.5 million persons employed in this sector, constituting not even one-third of 1 per cent of India's total working force, are appropriating more than 5 per cent of gross domestic product. Their contribution to the country's exports is close to one-third of the total. They have made nonsense of India's balance of

payments crisis which was a chronic malady in the decades immediately following independence. The buoyancy in the services sector has been responsible for a second-order buoyancy specially in consumer-goods manufactures, with further rippling effects on the rest of the industrial sector.

But do such events mean, once and for all, a surcease of gloomy tidings for the nation? Despite the export boom and the accelerated growth of gross domestic product, India remains one of the poorest countries in the world, going by the ranking of nations in terms of per capita income vetted by the United Nations. Precisely because of excessive dependency on outsourced growth and the bulge of activities in the services sector, income inequalities have aggravated in recent years. Gains derived from the farm strategy inducted four decades ago have petered out; agricultural growth over the past one decade and a half has in fact fallen behind the rate of growth of population; per capita availability of foodgrains too has steadily declined. Land reforms were never considered as a serious item in the nation's agenda. Trade liberalization insisted upon by the World Trade Organization has of late further worsened the conditions of a vast majority amongst the peasantry; suicide by farmers in distress is at present an everyday occurrence in many parts of the country. If account is taken of the fact that close to two-thirds of the nation still depend, on farm income for their survival; the contemporary Indian tragedy gets revealed in sharper profile. This is quite an extraordinary situation: gross domestic product is making impressive strides, but it is having no impression on the level of earnings of overwhelming sections of the working class. The curiosum of jobless growth, already partly noticeable in the early 1990s, is now established as a hard, nearly inflexible datum.

Even more daunting is the large-scale unawareness of the magnitude of the crisis. The media as well as the ruling politicians lustily cheer the arrival of the new bourgeoisie who are the sole beneficiaries of the recent trends in the economy.

Globalization and developments associated with it have closed thousands of small and medium-scale industrial units, ruined a considerable number of cottage crafts, rendered havoc to agriculture, thrown out of their jobs millions of farm and industrial workers and artisans. At the same time, a prosperous middle class, aggregating to as many as 150 to 200 million, has emerged in the limelight. They, strong supporters of the globalization hypothesis, are rapidly veering to a comprador mind-set. The country's bourses are reaching dizzy heights because of their indulgence; they have come to regard the windfall from outsourcing as an inalienable eternal truth of existence: few bother to stop and take cognizance of the not-altogether-inconceivable possibility of the bursting of the bubble of outsourcing-based comfort perchance a shift takes place in policies and practices in, for example, the United States.

Come to think of it, is not outsourcing itself a reincarnation of colonialism and dependency, albeit in a new form? Thousands of black immigrants imported into the United States from the Dark Continent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries slaved away, for generations on end, to raise wheat, corn, cotton and tobacco in plantations across the southern States, receiving no wages beyond subsistence. The surplus accruing from their labour provided the wherewithal for the massive industrialization of North America. The current vogue of outsourcing is not much different from the culture of imported slave labour in the United States or that of indentured labour in the Caribbean region, Fiji and Mauritius in the past centuries; the only difference is that low-wage workers are no longer imported, they stay in their home base in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Gurgaon and such other spots, are paid wages that are perhaps only about 5 per cent of what needs to be paid in the United States for work of the same quality and quantity; the profitability of American – and Western – capitalism is thereby left

unimpaired. The units in India ensure the supply side of outsourcing; their employees are, so to say, slaves at large.

Paradoxically, they have nonetheless contributed to the widening of economic inequalities. For while these external slaves are paid a bare fraction of the standard wage rate for work of the same specification in, say, the United States, even so, what they earn is on an average several times higher than the average earnings of a technologist or scientist or artisan in typical Indian conditions. Liberalization has taught the Indian middle class the virtue of profit maximization; there is therefore an almost unlimited supply of aspirants to join the outsourcing units; a rapid migration consequently takes place from universities and technical institutions towards the direction of the information technology-related units and other modernized capital-using segments of the economy, including banks and insurance companies.

Should not this development be cause for immense worry? In the long run, it is likely to lead to an intellectual vacuum in universities and other institutes of higher learning. Even public administration is unlikely to remain unaffected. Recruitment for public services, where remuneration is a pittance compared to what the outsourcing units offer, could create a steep decline in the calibre of personnel entering government service at different levels; the impact on administration, including development administration, could not but be adverse. Consider too the further prospect. With income distribution continuing to tilt against the poor and those left out of the boom in the export sector and the stock exchanges, social disturbances are likely to spread with increasing intensity; the State machinery would be woefully ill equipped to tackle the unfolding situation.

Meanwhile, other symptoms of economic and social degeneracy are showing up. Liberalization preaches the imperative necessity of the government vacating the commanding heights of the economy; public investment is

supposed to be the villain of the piece in the affairs of men. The government in New Delhi has been following the precept. Procurement of foodgrains by the State has declined, severely affecting the public distribution system and endangering food security for large sections of the poor and the lower middle class. There is also a steady shrinkage in the supply of infrastructural services which, for example, agriculture needs, or which are essential for the survival of the urban and rural poor, such as housing, public health amenities, sanitation and potable water. The government, however, is cajoled into investing in infrastructural activities where private profitability is low but which are greatly demanded by the rich, for instance, bridges, highways, fly-overs, shopping malls, etc. The poor therefore suffer on both counts. The cut-back in public investment implies a diminution in the provision of public utilities from which they could benefit. And the first charge even of the curtailed public outlay is largely to cater to the demands of the affluent. Even when allotments are made in the public domain for ameliorating the conditions of the poor, the funds do not get spent because of administrative sloth; this is the fate currently overtaking the rural employment guarantee scheme.

The issues the essays in this volume had focussed on have not disappeared. A society which believes in turning its back on its majority had already come into existence; it has now received the imprimatur of formal recognition. The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act is beautifully designed to thwart any initiative on the part of the public sector to make even moderately generous outlays on social services intended for the distressed sections.

Innocents are still around, liberal-minded in the old sense, who are not yet prepared to shed their optimism. Even if the State withdraws from meeting its obligations to the nation's majority, the magnanimous-minded amongst the comfortably placed, the hope is expressed, will, on their own, spending from

their private coffers, build houses and open schools and hospitals for the poor, and save the environment from spoliation fostered by unplanned economic growth. Few from the affluent classes are prepared to humour such pipedreams. The archetypal response of this set is the one coming from an individual who heads one of the largest Information Technology related industrial units in the country. Requested to make a modest outlay for improving the sanitation and other infrastructural conditions in the city where his unit is located – specially in areas inhabited by the poor – he was devastatingly forthright: 97.5 per cent of the net profits of his unit accrued from the United States, Germany and Japan; he could not care the least whether India's poor lived or died.

We thus come to face the crucial question. Can a nation survive and prosper in an ideological vacuum? Once upon a distant time, the Indian National Congress had wrapped itself in the ethos of nationalism. With Independence, that theme lost its relevance. Another pre-Independence commitment was for the upliftment of the poor and down-trodden. A further promise was the introduction of universal adult suffrage. While the shibboleth of building a socialist pattern of society and removal of poverty has continued to be mouthed by ruling political groups, the bulk of the electorate have remained miserably poor. Politicians in power have pontificated on the necessity of eradicating poverty and, in the same breath, practise an altogether reverse strategy for nearly half a century. That long season of hypocrisy is perhaps approaching its terminal point growing awareness even without formal literacy threatens to be the new reality. The compulsions of vote banks are therefore inducing political groups to adopt rapidly shifting positions. Ideology, though, has ceased to make the grade, unless it be the ideology of opportunism.

The town cynic has always been around; there is little reason to assume his profession is now ended. The dialectics of caste is yet to be supplanted by that of class. One consequence is

the vulgar race currently on among the different political parties to mark out distinct areas of influence for themselves, often on the basis of caste affiliations. The national electorate is resembling the image of a cracked mirror. The Congress these days does not get more than a quarter of the total votes cast in any national election; nor does the Bharatiya Janata Party. The Left, caught in a bind on account of the caste-class configuration, has not been able to raise its share to beyond 10 per cent. The rest of the field is no man's land to be targeted by obscurantists of the oddest sort, caste-based sectarians and regional groupings who do not concern themselves with enunciation of any long-range goals: they live for today or till the date of the next poll. Amid such proceedings, anything goes in the name of serving the poor and the oppressed.

Ideology meanwhile has been on the wane. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a precursor to the disappearance of the East European socialist bloc. The period has also coincided with China's new socio-economic experiments, euphemistically referred to by its enthusiasts as socialism with Chinese characters. It has, however, evoked other interpretations too. Given this state of ideological turmoil in the world socialist movement, it is not much of a surprise that the Left in India has found itself on wobbly grounds. Barring Latin America, the neo-liberals have established themselves most firmly across the continents. The philosophy on offer on behalf of the votaries of liberalization boils down to a tenet whose basic message is self-seeking. Debate will continue whether it is really an ideology, or the negation of one.

If vacuity of thought is the ruling idea, it can catch on quickly, and, in the process, breed a genre of behavioural opportunism. This is exactly what is coming about. The dilemma the Left is facing in India is obvious; the agony it is causing is equally obvious. For instance, should you stick to your socialist ideology and refuse to accept investible funds from private

sources, whether domestic or foreign, you would have no alternative but to go to the wall. Again, if you defy the reality of caste and persist in dreaming of a natural transmutation of caste into class, others might walk away with your constituency. If you try to keep away from the blight of Information Technology-enabled service activities which end up in a regime of the comprador-minded, you run the hazard of being described as Luddites and deserted by those sections of the middle class who were with you till now.

None of these issues have suddenly been sprung upon us; they were there all along, in various forms and shades, echoing the tussle between faith and cynicism. Several of the essays in *The Starkness of It* betray a pre-occupation with the generic problem. Does it then follow that the more it changes, the more it remains the same? It is best to confess: one hardly knows the answer.

Perhaps the lack of ideological moorings has partly facilitated the dissemination, on a wide scale, of the concept of global terror. The purpose motivating the terror-monger is to create an environment of widespread, irrational fear which could evoke hatred directed toward a specific target. Terror supposedly needs to be combated through counter-terror, and under State auspices. In the engineered hullabaloo, no opportunity is being allowed to us to sort out in our minds whether a reversal of the arrangement of facts is not called for, whether those accused of being the source of terror were not themselves the original victims of terror.

The 'Calcutta Diary' pieces could not quite foretell the dawn of the hour of terror. They were nonetheless seized with a parallel concern, separating heroes from anti-or non-heroes. Whatever the time and whatever the state of the polity, some individuals stand out a little aside from the crowd. They often plough a lonely furrow. They are denied the recognition that is their due by contemporary society. So what, they stick to their ideology and their convictions. Some of the essays in this volume

refer to a number of such individuals. One can take a wager that the tribe of Snehangshu Acharyyas and Samar Sens will henceforth get thinner and thinner. Another realization hurts about equally: in the wake of liberalization, culture and literature have entered a dim phase. Between the Internet and satellite television, the methodology of communications between human beings is totally transformed. That apart, the splurge in consumption has contracted the time people can set aside to think or devote to the muses. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir no longer excite, one fears, the faculty of intellection of men and women. Even exploration of the psyche, which was the obsession of someone like Georges Simenon, is an extraneous subject in today's context. And sensitive, awe-inspiring prose, dealing with the condition of man in the manner of a Graham Greene or a James Baldwin, will conceivably be laughed at by the current audience.

One must still persist. The act of persistence is an expression of faith, faith that the future could yet be different from what the present portrays. *The Starkness of It* is not, in the view of its author; an anachronism; it is soul-searching. Humanity survives because it does not adjourn its soul-searching sessions, never mind war and pestilence, never mind the vacuum in philosophy.

## PEOPLE

## A QUALITY CALLED PASSION

If you want to, it is all there, you can have his address: 24 Goodwood Court, Cromwell Road, Hove, East Sussex. An old man, in his eighties, physically incapacitated, living through his memories, and from time to time, putting them down on paper. The result is a slim little volume, modestly printed, available only in private circulation. What he writes about is, however, very far away from the rolling Sussex Downs and the nondescript 1980s.

The person concerned is an old India hand; he was, once upon a time, between 1929 and 1938, in the Indian Civil Service, carried on the Bengal cadre, and saw service in Asansol, Rangpur, Tangail and Calcutta. As the war clouds began gathering in Europe, he put in his papers and went back of England. The then Chief Secretary tried to persuade him out of the decision: why chuck a promising career, his foot was well on the ladder, shouldn't he reconsider? No, Michael Carritt did not reconsider, he perhaps could not take it any more, the burden of a dual existence, for, while he was a member of the Indian Civil Service, a cog in the *apparatchik*, the *apparatchik* of imperial plunder and repression, he was, at the same time a secret emissary of the British Communist Party, assigned to maintain liaison with leading Indian comrades. Without question, there was in this instance a reversal of tradition. Scions of upper-class Indian families, sent away to England for 'higher' education, used to succumb to the trauma of the British universities as they were in the twenties and the thirties and be back home as firebrand

communists. In Carritt's case, it worked the other way round, it was almost a return of the compliment. India made him, and the horrendous inequities of the imperial arrangement turned him into a Marxist. For a number of years, he carried on his dual role. He could have quoted from Vladimir Hyia Lenin: morality has to be subdued to the needs of the Revolution. Nonetheless, the manner of his functioning perhaps set him a moral problem, which he solved by getting out. Or perhaps the party leadership wanted him, for their own purposes back in England. The fact of one of his brothers, who volunteered for the Republican cause, getting killed in the Spanish Civil War could also have hastened his decision to return home, bidding goodbye to the heaven-born service. Not much is known about what he did after going back to England. Certainly he served the cause, to England. Certainly he served the cause, but was never in the limelight. The vast majority who serve the cause are in any event not in the limelight. Carritt came from a reasonably well-off, upper-class Oxford family; his father was a philosophy don. The slim volume he has made available is silent on many things. Did he continue, without interruption, through all these years his association with the communist party, did he re-visit India; did he ever meet again Puran Chand Joshi, general secretary of the fledgling Indian party, who was then leading an underground existence and whom Carritt provided with shelter and food in his Calcutta flat, or Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, to whom he had to convey a message, on a blazing sunny afternoon, at a rendezvous along the Juhu beach? Carritt does not tell us. Permit the old man the dignity of his privacy.

But shouldn't we be grateful for whatever he allows us to share with him? In its own radius, it is a magnificent story. For Carritt did not start out as a communist, he was not one when he arrived in India for the first time. A public school boy, with an Oxford degree in classics, he sat for the examination, and chose a career in the Indian Civil Service. All he had in the way of equipment was an unsullied liberal mind. By his example, he,

however, proved the point. The human animal is capable of making a qualitative leap. The milieu makes the man. The milieu, true, does not change all human beings, but even if it changes some human beings, even if it changes a single one, the point is clinched. Carritt made two different leaps, he crossed two divides simultaneously. By upbringing a plain liberal, with upper class mores, he transformed himself into an ideologue, and discovered his soul in Marxism. At the same time, he walked across the racial divide too. He arrived in India as an adjunct of the imperial paraphernalia. Bengal at that moment was seething with patriotic discontent, terrorists were on the rampage, they had organized themselves into suicide squads, determined to liquidate at random British magistrates and police chiefs. As a probationary assistant magistrate in Midnapore, Carritt witnessed the killing, one after another, in the course of a bare six months, of two of his district officers – Peddie and Douglas. Hate and violence and fear were in the air. Carritt could have succumbed into the conventional role as a member of the master race, sent out to teach the natives the lesson of their lives. This was the natural, predictable thing to do. But he turned away. He de-classed himself, ceased to be a part of the ruling class; in his attitude and emotions, he joined the people whom he was supposed to sit upon. As Sir John Anderson, Governor of Bengal from 1933 to 1938 commented when Carritt's ideological identity was discovered subsequently, after he had left the service, it was duplicity. As a class point of view, Anderson could not have been more right. One, who belonged to the master race, did not let any other members of the race know, silently, quietly, and without ceremony, crossed over and started working for the other side. In this slim volume of reminiscences, there is no trace of bravado of any kind. It was an immensely difficult decision to desert one's class, to desert its ideas and ideology, to desert, in one sense, one's nation too, and join the camp of the enemy. For Carritt, the agony must have been seeralfold. He was fond of Peddie, his superior officer whom the terrorists struck down in cold blood. He had

come to respect Peddie, who taught him a great deal of the rudiments of district administration. And yet, among those Indian comrades whom he joined in secret, there must have been several who gloated at Peddie's murder, who, for all he knew, perhaps had plotted the murder.

It could not but have called for moral strength of awesome proportions to do what Carritt did. None of these internal convulsions the quiet Englishman chooses to mention. But, again, this is perhaps precisely what defines the majesty of human existence. A human being is a part of his social climate; is, in fact, its product; he has, at the same time, the capability to transgress it. The immediate climate in which he breathes goads an individual to think, feel, argue, go through the processes of intellection and emotion; the dialectics of this process transforms the human being, and transports him or her into a new plateau of social existence. Perhaps you need a particular climate of time too for the kind of total transformation Carritt could persuade himself to experience. The twenties and the thirties, who can deny, had a unique chemistry in their molecules which rendered young people into what they became: they dared to give up, but they dared to embrace too, to walk across and join the camp of the conventional enemy, for, forget the grammar, the conventional enemy was the truest love.

And, such as in the case of Carritt, you had to do all this with a finesse and a careful carefree-ness. You have uprooted yourself, deserted your class, joined those on the other side of the barricade, but the interests of the causes demand that you must not, for the present, be found out, your-erstwhile-friends-now-enemies must not entertain a whiff of suspicion. The new friends you have embraced, the class to which you have chosen to defect, must also, up to a point, be kept guessing; nothing must come out in the open. At a distance of fifty years, Carritt recounts with fond nostalgia the story of Jogen Babu, the lawyer in Tangail, a fierce nationalist, who would defend young

terrorists and the rack-rented peasants in the magistrate's court. The police would put up concocted cases after concocted cases, Jogen Babu would appear on behalf of the accused persons, and Carritt, scandalizing the police, would invariably let the prisoners go. Jogen Babu and Carritt never met each other outside the open court, but Jogen Babu knew, a half-wink of a drooping eyelid, the flicker of a smile on the tired old face, those were the only trace of acknowledgement to his part that the young British magistrate had crossed the Rubicon, that he belonged to them. Carritt was aware that Jogen Babu *knew*, and Jogen Babu was aware that the magistrate knew that he knew. It was a silent, unspoken conspiracy, and there is a certain magnificence in the way Carritt describes it. [You recognize your comrades for what they are, your comrades recognize you for what you are, yet there would be a barrier of silence, a barrier of caution, a barrier of circumspection. Comrades, this is war, and we must not let our enemies know; each of us, in our own manner, would serve the cause, the contentment lies in serving the cause; for some of us the circumstances are a little more trying than they are for some others, but, comrades, we are in it together, for it is the cause, it is what fulfillment as human beings means to you and me.

Cynics and agnostics have filled the arena. Ideology, we are being assured, has reached a dead-end, it is a lost cause. Be smart, avail of the opportunities, soak yourself with layer after layer of pragmatism, we have to walk into the brave new world of the twenty-first century, which is now a bare fifteen years away. Once upon a time, only fifty years ago, it was a different concept of the brave new world, where young people would march off to the Spanish Civil War, and many would not return. In that dreamful epoch, conscience was king, and the ideologues were the only ones who mattered. In our country boys and girls, in their late teens and early twenties, would learn how to handle a .45 revolver; an apparent smile on their lips, they would venture out to raid British armoury and as easily, throw away their lives. Also

very rare, improbable things would happen.] A stray English boy, with a meager capital stock of education in the classics and innocence writ large on his countenance, would join the Indian Civil Service, come to this country to rule and, aghast at what he would experience, quietly walk over to the other side. When he left the service, Carritt commuted two-thirds of the pension due to him into a cash sum. Once Sir John Anderson's men discovered who he was, the residual pension was cut off. Carritt, with a wry, dry wit, describes the episode. He had loved, and must have lost a great deal, the one-third bit of the mundane pension was the least of it. Listen to him: 'Yes, it has been worthwhile. I have made plenty of mistakes – and who has not done so? – and taken decisions of which I am not altogether proud. I have been naïve thanks to my sheltered years of education and precipitate in leaping to conclusions. But it has not been all a waste of time and effort, and given the same circumstances of time and history – I think I would choose the same sort of road.'

An old man in his eighties, in quiet retirement in the Sussex Downs next to the sea, has taken time out to write about his great romantic love. A flimsy little book, but a great book in its own manner. The time and circumstances are what we make of them. Carritt made them, changed them from one set to another, proving the Heraclitean dictum, character is destiny. Your ideology, which is the other name for passion, provides you the kind of strength needed to change the milieu in this fashion. Carritt would not mind taking the same road over again. This old man, physically wasting away in his eighties, would insist, again in his unobtrusive way, on leaving a little memento behind. It was, he is bent on telling us, all a tremendous lark, because he loved, because he came to passion. One can see the twinkle in his eye: come on, it can be done, it has to be done, even you can do it, but you must have passion, you must come to love.

MARCH, 1986

## LEFT IN THE LURCH

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan continues to lie unconscious in New Delhi's most prestigious hospital. Good for him; he will not have to offer comments on the fortieth anniversary of the nation's Independence. He is known 'to speak his mind', and there was no way he could refrain from being rude once questions were put to him. It is therefore good even for others that he has sunk into deep coma. With him around, the cliché of the adage would have needed to be reversed; ask him questions and you will be told plenty of truth. Truth is a difficult medicine to swallow in this climate, so why try?

Four decades ago, on the eve of Independence, the Congress leadership left Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his brother, Khan Sahib, in the lurch. For long years, as much against the British imperialists as against the religious bigotry of the Muslim League, they had held aloft the banner of Pakhtoon dignity and pride. The succession of Afghan wars had fragmented the Pushtu-speaking populace; of those who spoke the language, about as many were left out of Afghanistan as were left in. The Khan brothers, shepherding the sections who were forced into the Indian empire, would not forsake their Pakhtoon persona. Partly bowled over by Mahatma Gandhi's charm, they were, however, happy to merge their supposedly sub-national urge into the great nation-building exercise the Congress party had embarked upon. Come 1947; in the scampering hurry to be

Mountbatten's first ministers, the Congress leaders were more than willing to cut corners. The Khan brothers were unceremoniously ditched; they were supposed to fend for themselves in a hostile Pakistan. It is a rather unsavoury chapter in the history of the nation's freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi himself headed the list of the dispensables; no qualms must therefore have been felt while giving Frontier Gandhi the short shrift. But Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was always a votary of self-reliance. The Indian betrayal hurt, stet did not faze him. He and his followers had to redo their coordinates; there was, however, no surrender of principles during these forty years. In and out of prison, in and out of banishment, it had been a familiar pattern of dedicated dangerous living. Since his people were still unfree, what else was to be done?

The class alignments within the establishments are similar in India and Pakistan; so the manner of handling the problem of nationalities is also almost exactly the same. In any case, for Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, 1947 heralded no qualitative shift in the nature of war, only a change in the identity of the adversary. In contrast, his erstwhile colleagues in India had to adapt themselves to a major attitudinal change. The imperialists ceased to be the anathema they were in the past; there was the extraordinary phenomenon of the midnight crossing of lines, the national government learnt by rote many of the clichés the British had fallen in love with. The national leadership could not have enjoyed more this near-effortless switching of roles. The paraphernalia of the imperial regime became the national administration. The Frontier Gandhi, from his distance, could only soliloquise on the bizarre events unfolding.

But he also serves who stands and is betrayed. Forty years ago, with zest and alacrity, the Congress bosses snapped their links from Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. He and his people were henceforth on their own, those who ascended the throne in New Delhi would not give them even the time of the day. No

harm, however, in praising him from a distance. He was giving the Pakistan leaders a bloody nose, there was much acclaim for his conduct and activities. It was a safe enough pastime, the Frontier Gandhi was fighting the battle of self-determination for his Pakhtoons against another government, not our own. We have ditched him, but now we do not mind cheering him along. No ambiguity clouded the Indian philosophy of compartmental adoration: devolution is lovely for Pakistan and our other neighbours, unnecessary and unworkable in our own land. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan was never a pragmatist in any phase of his life. It is a strange India he was inveigled into visiting for medical treatment two months ago, an India stripped of all ideals.

Those without passion are not necessarily without consistency. The Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka are now about to receive the same treatment that was accorded to the Frontier Gandhi's *khudai khidmagars* forty seasons ago. To the hedonists in New Delhi, these rebels have outlived their role. For a time, supporting them was worth New Delhi's while because of the dividend it yielded in the southern states. Other considerations have, however, intervened. These are hard times. Acute domestic exigencies call for an endeavour towards improving the image overseas. If foreigners come to like you, your own countrymen jolly well ought to too, is the basic theory. The reputation of a bully among next-door neighbours will not any longer do. A reversal of policy vis-à-vis Sri Lanka is an emergent necessity. After all, are not we the formal chairman of SAARC for the current year? It is therefore the turn of the Tamils across the Palk Strait to receive the treatment. They must be pressed into accepting the agreement reached with the Sri Lanka authorities. New Delhi has enough clout in its command to make the recalcitrant ones amongst the Tamils to see reason. If they nonetheless remain adamant, arrangements will be made to teach them the lesson they deserve.

Will it work? As far as the Indian prime minister is

concerned, the subjective reality in Sri Lanka has undergone a sea change. But will the objective reality listen to his bidding? The Sri Lanka Tamils have been led up the garden path over the years. From amongst them, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, because they were the pet of the prime minister's pet in Tamil Nadu, were picked out for special favours. They were plied with funds and other resources. Camps, for organizing relief as well as for military training, were arranged in different locations in Tamil Nadu under official auspices. Liberally provided with arms and telecommunications equipment, the LTTE outfit was encouraged to pattern itself after a quasi-independent mini regime. Barely a few weeks ago, all canons of international behaviours were given the go-by in order to reach the besieged Tamils in Jaffna for some badly needed relief material. Suddenly the signals have got switched. Because the Indian prime minister is under tremendous internal political pressure, and he has concluded that an improvement in his external image will partly relieve this pressure, the official line is changed; subjective reality. After Bofors is different from subjective reality. Before Bofors. But to the Tamils lighting for their survival in Sri Lanka, the objective reality has not changed. They might therefore prefer to call a spade a spade, and a betrayal a betrayal. Not that there have not been other major instances of breaches of faith in between, but the parallel between how the Khan brothers were made the sacrificial lambs in the mid-summer of 1947 and the manner in which the Tamil Tigers are now receiving their comeuppance is worthy enough to be noted.

Will applied cynicism serve the purpose it is intended to serve? Will goodwill and admiration for the Indian authorities start oozing out of Colombo's pores, and convey the appropriate message to Bangladesh, Nepal and the Maldives? Such a denouement is unlikely. The Sri Lanka administration is split down the middle on the wisdom of the accord, and the adversaries most directly involved were reluctant journeymen at

the signing. The bleeps from Colombo thus promise to be both confused and confusing. Should the pro Indian logistical to the rebels be withdrawn, the violence might abate, but with the crucial referendum still a prospective event, tension would continue, there would be much mutual suspicion in the air, and those who are compulsive India-baiters might find no particular reason to change their tune merely because the Indian prime minister would dearly want them to. This individual has already created a niche for himself as an inveterate signatory of accords pieced together in haste. Such accords have also tended to come apart very soon with an eerie regularity. Besides, the accord at Colombo notwithstanding, Bofors will be Bofors, and Punjab will be Punjab. One feels like adding, the gripping drama at the inspection of the farewell guard of honour at Colombo notwithstanding.

But not that no lessons at all need be garnered from what will pass as contemporary history. For the family which was presided over the shaping of Indian destiny over the forty years since 1947, it has been a continuum of three generations: the daughter following the father and her son succeeding her. There has been of late much learned comment and analysis on the wide chasm which allegedly separates the grandson's social philosophy and political reflexes from the grandfather's. The contrary is the truth. Heredity does indeed matter. Neither Mahatma Gandhi nor the reactionary Sardar from Bardoli was responsible for the abrupt collapse of the Cabinet Mission proposal for an Indian federation and its supplanting by the Mountbatten plan to cut up the country. It was the poet-politician from Anand Bhawan who chose, without too great a provocation to get involved into a purposeless argument with the Muslim League president in the spring of 1947, which ensured the country's partition. Perhaps the squeeze put on the profits they had accumulated during war time by the League finance minister in the interim government persuaded the

Hindu capitalists to encourage the poet-politician from the sidelines. One thing led to another. Within the breathtakingly brief interval of nine or ten weeks Pakistan emerged as a reality, and the Khan brothers were despatched to their fate. The grandfather's impetuosity is now riding piggyback on the grandson's shoulders. It is a proud inheritance. The Sri Lanka Tamils are receiving their just deserts; they trusted too much. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan lies in deep coma. It is an anniversary of a sort.

OCTOBER, 1992

### AN AUTHENTIC HERO

The claws are out. They have, over there, toppled Lenin, how dare you then still stick to your devotions? You too must forsake your miserable ideology, and join the crowd of crooks and careerists. In case you are reluctant to do so, you will be taken care of. As Shankar Guha Niyogi has been.

Guha Niyogi's martyrdom, why not say it, is not altogether unique. He is, no question, an authentic hero, but heroes tend to emerge, almost in a predictable manner, under unpredictable circumstances. That has been the format throughout history. The anguish over what man has done to man reflects the rationality of the human species. It does not trap everyone, but only a few. Even so, there is a pattern in this entrapment which makes it a cliché. Such clichés save civilization. Perhaps such clichés also define civilization.

Shankar Guha Niyogi's could have been a very ordinary existence. He possessed enough raw material to be a nondescript face in the crowd. Yet he became something altogether different. He chucked it all, bouncing, on his own volition, from the low-level equilibrium of a conformist scenario. Some accidents are usually responsible for developments of this nature. In the present instance, who knows, it is perhaps the alias which made the man. Dhiresh Guha Niyogi, a youngster from Jalpaiguri in northern Bengal, drifted into Madhya Pradesh, being accepted as an apprentice boiler operator at the Bhilai Steel Plant. He then moved on to the quarry works in neighbouring Dalli-Rajra.

Dhiresh once had read some Marx and Lenin during his Students' Federation days. Much more relevant, as he trudged around in Bhilai and Dalli-Rajra, he connected, he saw the link between what he had read in the socialist tracts and the continuing tragedy of the Adivasis, the so-called aborigines, the people to whom this country originally belonged, and whom the carpet-baggers mercilessly dispossessed throughout the centuries. The pattern has been so repetitive as to induce another cliché, namely, that the vulgarity of the social oppression could not but rattle the conscience of some individuals. Whose conscience will be disturbed and whose will not be are queries not quite tractable through theorems of normal probability distribution. Guha Niyogi was the victim of this stochastic confusion. He stepped out of the orbit of conventionality, determined to organize the Adivasi mine-workers. Of course, he soon lost his job, but by then he had made the connection between his dream and his milieu. The police were after him. An alias became socially necessary, Guha Niyogi became Shankar Lal Thakur. In the course of the next near-two decades, the mine-owners did not quite give up harassing him, because he did not give up harassing them. The police did not give up either. A symbiosis had meanwhile taken place, a fusion of reverie and activism, which enabled him to take these irritations in his stride. The legend became the man, because the man became the legend. If Marxism is Hegel turned topsy-turvy, the ideology's appeal has a core of Newtonian truth too, such that every action has an opposite and equal reaction. Shankar Guha Niyogi was desperately anxious to prove the point. Oppression needed to be matched by resistance, of equal thrust and capability. The oppressed ones must be told about their rights. It was a question of catching up on their part, of closing the gap between their current being and the role assigned to them by history, the exploited thousands in Chhattisgarh owed it to themselves to wipe out the gap. Shankar Guha Niyogi grasped the charm

learning by doing; he impressed upon the Adivasi peasantry and working class that mobilization was the only means to push the scoundrels back, they must learn to come together, discover the strength latent in the routine of suffering, protests and valour. He was, in several ways, an instinctive maverick; the standard political forms made him uncomfortable; the feeling was reciprocated; the regular political functionaries too were uncomfortable in his company. He struck out on his own. It is indeed difficult to assess whether, in the net, the working class movement gains or loses because of decisions on the part of some dedicated souls to plough the lonely furrow. Ask his starry-eyed admirers - now turned mourners - in Chhattisgarh, they do not have the least doubt in their minds, they will tell you all there is supposedly to be told regarding the furious acceleration of the pace of history Shankar Guha Niyogi had brought about. The Adivasi mine-workers have now a recognizable identity, tolerably decent wages and tolerably decent housing. In the vicinity, the casual workers in the construction industry have almost ceased to be casual; their jobs are by and large regularized, so much so that, according to a sample of catty pronouncements, Guha Niyogi was in danger of losing his profession of a trade union leader. However, he scored as a rank amateur, unbound by paradigms. He could show the organized, according to some, fossilized-trade union movement how to affect the qualitative leap across the centuries. Under the Chhattisgarh skies, it was still nearly pre-historic times when he arrived. Were one to wait for inchoate consciousness to go through the stodgy chain of dialectics, declension and progress, it would be another instance of endless running simply in order to stay still. It was obviously important to learn to frog jump, to spurn the queue, to bypass the advice of grammarians. Shankar Guha Niyogi chucked the grammar, and pursued his instinct. He did not forsake Lenin and Mao; he improvised on the basis of Lenin and Mao. Besides, he did not lead; he decided not merely to declass, but to deface, himself; he

became one of them, another Adivasi, indistinguishable from the innumerable ordinary oppressed ones, sharing their lives, sharing their fate, sharing their fears. That is how trust begets trust, and love. An individual's courage and sense of outrage started it off, and crystallized into the granite of resistance on the part of the many. The oppressors in the neighbourhood stuck their tail between their legs and retreated, even if temporarily.

Guha Niyogi laid stress on one apparently incidental issue, which might yet turn out to be a phenomenon of major import. The battle against economic injustice and social oppression, which is at the same time the struggle for enlightenment, must have a moral basis; placing crooks and habitual boozers at the head of the procession will not do. The person who chooses to lead must convince by his personal example; the demonstration must begin with the leader's own conduct. The liquor lobby learnt to its cost the power of the turbulence Shankar Guha Niyogi had unleashed. For them too, it was a matter of life and death. Reaction had retreated, but it did not cease to plot. It got Shankar Guha Niyogi in the end.

The legend now ends, or perhaps the legend only begins. Guha Niyogi read the socialist classics, but, let us be fair, doctrines were not his cup of tea. His success – and his martyrdom – nonetheless do have a relevance for touching on the problems of revolutionary activism. It is a stupendous challenge in the heartland of Aryavarta, where the setting continues to be prehistoric, and talk of social and economic emancipation even today evokes wide-eyed disbelief. Instead of waiting out the dialectical hours, why not improvise, why not concentrate on building cadres, a few scores of them, cadres in the image of the Shankar Guha Niyogi – cadres with a moral fibre? Cadres who will spread their anonymous presence amongst the deprived and the dispossessed, be flesh of their flesh, fill them with the knowledge that there could be no greater prowess than what their own mobilization is capable of harnessing?

Shankar Guha Niyogi cannot be fabricated through the assembly line process. We are truly back at the beginning. There is outrage at Shankar Guha Niyogi's murder. Outrage is hardly enough. It has to be converted into a moral challenge, a proposition easier to enunciate than to vindicate. The convulsions inside are as genuine as they can be, but the convulsions by themselves cannot create history. The igniting of the moral ferment is beyond the pale of a formula, it is the outcome of enlightenment, enlightenment concerning mobilization, on the basis of love and trust. If that implies a certain season of patience, there is no escape from that truth. The failure to replicate, immediately, Shankar Guha Niyogis in their thousands and let them loose all over is an aspect of objective reality. It is therefore a double mourning, mourning for Shankar Guha Niyogi felled in the prime of his activism, as well as mourning on account of the tragedy of the objective reality being what it is.

There is a different kind of aching at the passing of Hitend Chaudhury, who was the managing trustee of the foundation responsible for the publication of this journal. His ambience could not be more different from Shankar Guha Niyogi's but, he too had exemplified, on his own manner, an extraordinary genre of integrity. Hitend Chaudhury, how few are now around to remember, was a co-founder of the original Bombay Talkies, had he and Himansu Rai not dared, there would not have been any *Achut Kanya* or *Kankan* or *Bandhan*. Due to them taking courage in their hands, we had the Devika Ranis and the Durga Khotes and the Sadhana Boses, the Sohrab Modis, the Prithviraj Kapoors, and the Ashok Kumars, and, still later, the Meena Kumari and the Kamini Kaushals, the Guru Dutts and the Gulzars. Gentle, civilized, softspoken up to the limit of softspokenness, Hitend Chaudhury spelled generosity. Others made money by availing of the opportunities pried open by him; they made their pile, courtesy Hitend Chaudhury: most of them

failed to convey even a bare acknowledgement for what they owed to this man. He did not mind; there was never any malice before or after-thought in him, nor any back-biting on his part. He took the rough with the smooth. The technological and cultural upheavals in Bombay's film world in due course left him and his friends behind. He did not complain. He would not make it a point of bragging that he was the person responsible, more than anyone else, for international recognition coming Satyajit Ray's way, first at Cannes in 1956, and next year, at Venice.

This journal's debt to him is more direct. During the closing weeks of the Second World War, he was part of a trade team sent across to the United States for exploring post-war market possibilities for Indian merchandise. Hiten Chaudhury was distressed by the fuddy-duddy quality of economies most members of the delegation spouted; it was to him a matter of both agony and shame. His patriotism was incensed. On his return, he kept pestering his elder brother, Sachin Chaudhury, to do something to redress the situation. That was how *The Economic Weekly* originated. Hiten Chaudhury was the key man occupying the background, arranging the finances, including the advertisements, organizing the press, ensuring the distribution of copies. It was an unprecedented romantic adventure; it was cottage industry taking on the world; it was cheek; it epitomized the cockiness of post-independence India. When it was time for the *Economic and Political Weekly*, he was again there, the quietest of men, effacing himself, looking after the Sameeksha Trust, set up so that the new journal could rely on a sound enough infrastructure. Hiten Chaudhury continued to guide the affairs of the *EPW* for the stretch of a full quarter of a century. Self-reliance is a dirty word in some quarters. There is still no greater pride than affirming the fact that this journal is now a self-reliant entity. Anybody can take a pot shot at it; it does not mind, it will turn the other cheek, a sign, not of weakness, but of a deeper

inner strength. That such a circumstance has been rendered possible is mostly on account of the contributions of this silent, gentle individual, who always made his point, but without ever raising his voice.

Some men are not referred to in history books; such men nonetheless have a hand in shaping history. Hiten Chaudhury nurtured no illusions about the quality of recognition likely to come his way consequent to his steadfast espousal of the causes dear to his heart. Private heartaches are just that; it will not be manners to make a display of them. Civilization, one nonetheless feels like assuring Hiten Chaudhury *ex post*, does not altogether die, despite no lack of effort on the part of boorish neighbours. The attributes which distinguished him, gentleness and magnanimity, are not common late twentieth century virtue. In that sense, Hiten Chaudhury was a misfit, and would soon have been proclaimed irretrievably irrelevant. There is an aching in the heart, but it is a good thing that he went when he did.

OCTOBER, 1991

## ANGRY, YET MUCH TOO CIVIL

James Baldwin is dead, from cancer, in a village in the south of France, where he had been living for the past few decades. The flow of crystal prose is therefore ended. This prose, nectar to the thirsty for so long, will not be added to any more. They will have to make do with the stock that is there. But does quantity matter? The effortlessness and elegance of the prose will continue to enchant. Over the years, Baldwin has said many poignant things, and many angry things. But he has said them in a matter of fact, direct way. The anger hits the bull's eye. It does not evoke any rancour though. The sense of tragedy is successfully conveyed, the resulting pain is, however, very nearly bearable. His theme, all the while, is the infamous human condition which defines large chunks of the United States, his motherland; but his words are so reasonably set next to one another that they almost flatter the adversaries, for whom the shaft is intended. And yet, there is no hint of compromise. This, then, is black magic. It is not everybody's inheritance. It is possible to mention one or two others who have come close to mastering the externality of James Baldwin's style. But the externality is just that. He still remains unique; the alchemy of technique and attitude is totally personal, and non-replicable. Time and again, Baldwin warns of the fire next time, the fire is however right here, now, in the belly of his prose, it burns, but does not hurt.

Should it have hurt, one wonders. Is it an accomplishment

or a deficiency of his creativity that his combative prose fails to induce violence? Was this why he, the native son, had to turn into a kind of recluse – an expatriate confessing his helplessness and guilt in the comfortable obscurity of Saint Paul deVance, the hill-top town in southern France? Some riddles in life are unresolved. Maybe this too is one such, why James Baldwin, who chose to dwell, exclusively, on the tragedy of his people, had to have an ostracised end.

Baldwin is dead, the stock of his output is now finite, and cannot be replenished. Let us cross over to another genre. We cross over to another genre, but not exactly to a different theme. Cricket was once an imperial game, specific to the British Empire. The empire is gone, cricket, however, remains an obsession with the English-speaking nations. Its role is, however, reversed. Even if not altogether reversed, at least transformed beyond recognition. In the Caribbean islands and elsewhere, the once-colonized and subjugated ones have learnt to return the compliment. Some of them can hurl the ball much faster, and with infinitely greater art and venom, than the whites; some of them have learnt to wield the willow with a grace such that that Greek god, Apollo, turns green with envy.

Vivian Richards' genre is different from James Baldwin's. It is nonetheless black magic. The cricket bat, he proves, is several things put together: it is sword, it is wand, it is violin, it is poetry, it is also thunder. Richards' approach is casual, almost as casual and guileless as Baldwin's prose. The elegance of the strokes, drives, cuts pulls and sweeps is again reminiscent of the liquid glow of Baldwin's composition. Once he is in the proper frame of mind, it is an astounding spectacle, for the elegance is matched by fearsome power, and it is slaughter to both innocents and deviants. When Richards strikes, he crushes his opponents. And he derives immense satisfaction from this act of annihilation; the delight is transparent, it shows on his countenance. The contrast to Baldwin's gentle whispering to the mountain could not be

any sharper. Richards, in other words, does not believe in benign conquests. As he unleashes himself, he also unleashes total contempt for his adversaries. He makes mince-meat of them because that is his intention, not to spare them even a fig leaf of dignity. The historical roles have been switched in cricket in this sense. The black *hauteur* has come to reveal itself in full imperial regalia; Richards' is an imperial pride which is on display as he sweeps aside the whites and others with pretensions of knowing how to play the game.

There is great violence in Vivian Richards. There is little of it in James Baldwin. The genres differ, but the chasm is not just of genres. The fact that they do not belong to the same country does not explain enough, for both the symmetry and the asymmetry have common symptoms. It is the generational gap between Baldwin and Richards which perhaps provides the clue to the absence of violence in one case and its presence in the other, even as it provides the clue for Baldwin's tragic, obscure death several thousands of miles away from his roots. His civility was no longer legal tender among his people; he was lucky he escaped, and just barely, from being dubbed as Uncle Tom. Violence has come of age, and is in absolute control of all systems. Expressing disdain for your enemy is not enough; it must be ground with *hauteur*, and let there be some spilling of blood. Time has to be measured in terms of the passing of a generation; it is a different ambience altogether.

There is a message in this for each and all, including for the Rip Van Winkles snoring away up on our hill tops. It would be difficult to come across a more class driven, colour conscious land than ours. The matrimonial columns only confirm what is fairly generally known: we are the original Nazis. In any event, it is a funny notion of a nation, with the strangest juxtaposition of castes, creeds and breeds. Travel every twenty or thirty miles, and you come across fresh, breathtaking instances of mismatch or anomaly. Yet, with much bravura, the fact of the existence of

separate nationalities is sought to be disputed, and film directors are invited to make their creative contributions to the output of subcommittees of the National Integration Council, as if a myth could be rendered more credible by make-believe. Meanwhile, as the generations pass, the perception of consciousness catches up with its reality. Those who have been by tradition imposed upon imbibe new skills; they also learn to discard manners. That India is being gradually turned into a gory battlefield reflects this contemporary phenomenon of changing of the guard. What was inevitable has already begun to happen.

The episode over Ambedkar's by-now-rendered-famous riddles exemplifies the shift to turbulence. Ambedkar's was a many-hued personality. He was bit scholar and bit adventurer, partly a man of principle and partly a man with an eye on the main chance, as much a Buddhist *bhikshu* as a super jingoist. The ambivalence in a way betrays his true identity, he was an unrepentant Hindu in the clothing of an infidel. He was the principal architect of the retrograde Indian Constitution, which codifies the laws and by-laws of a rigidly Hindu, imperial India. Precisely because he possessed such impeccable credentials, he could afford to take a few pot shots at the constituents of the Hindu pantheon. The obscurantists whom the system has nurtured over the years want their Ambedkar only in distilled measures; they would love to admire the Hindu expansionist after editing out his frivolities. It is however later than the system managers think. 'Subaltern' is a precious appellation, and an inappropriate one. Vivian Richards is no subaltern, nor does he intend to be one. He has imperial claims. So too is the case with those who have raised their voice of protest at the government of Maharashtra's dissemblings over the editing of Ambedkar's works. The protest has violent contours, a sure sign of the times. And it is only an overture. The real troubles are going to follow.

In another part of the world, lame: Baldwin too had read the sign of the times. He reached the correct conclusions and

withdrew to the south of France. He was a man of talent, let us grant it, a man of genius. He could create ethereal prose, elegant, effortless, going straight to the heart of the matter. He, it will still be said, suffered from a fatal flaw: despite the indignities his people were made to bear, he failed to lace his rancour with the power of violence. He was much too civil. He therefore cast himself out. Now that he is dead, do we feel sorry for him? Do we cast his memory out too while Vivian Richards and his team take over? Or should we leave it to history to judge history?

DECEMBER, 1987

### A LONELY TREK

A lonely funeral. Is not the description, however, a banality? Each person, once he arrives at the end-point, is in any case severely on his own, to each his particular peace that passes understanding. For Samar Sen, however, it was a lonely trek in a more humdrum sense too. This man, fifty odd years ago, wrote the most distilled poetry to define Calcutta's tragic isolation. Those poems were violently different from what the Bengalis, till then, thought poetry was about. They were both lullaby and elegy. The substratum of the populace addicted to the morphia of Rabindranath Tagore's assured placidity were slapped into a rude, new experience. None knew Calcutta or the vapid, cantankerous Bengalis more than Samar Sen the poet. He despised them, he was indulgent towards them. Because he despised them, he soon stopped writing poetry; what after all, was the rationale of preaching to the near-dead, the colonial mode has its own codes and rituals, why bother to interfere with them; your poetry will not be missed, irrespective of whether you produce your measured quota of output, the historical process will continue to roll along.

He was also proud, however, of being a Bengali, and that supplied part of the explanation. Certain things he could say through his intense, ferocious, non-conformist prose poems, none said these things better than him, but, beyond a point, the basic themes elude the modality; he had already said enough of

the obvious, why repeat and run the risk of being identified as just another one of the clique belonging to the miserable establishment of the non-established? Therefore, let him walk away from the stylised path, none will lament for him. A few will pretend to. To play to the gallery on their account would be beneath contempt. It was inevitable that, haunted by the colonial curse, he would write some brittle, brilliant poetry. It was equally inevitable that his Bengali intellect would hustle him into the inexorable logic of dialectical materialism. That logic would mature, in its own manner; it would mature even without him; and, besides, the sub-stratum he was concerning himself with was neither the base nor the superstructure. It was for him a matter of private honour which was also public conscience, he walked away when the going was good, he walked away because the going could never be good.

Economy of expression was what it was all about. Samar Sen was aghast at opulence. His private conscience was his social conscience; he hated the crowd, he lionized the crowd too. Without this hypothesis, it is impossible to explain the last twenty-five years of his life. Having written some of the most powerful poetry ever written in his language, he quit. And yet, he did not quit. The contradiction fitted him snugly. He did not choose the alcoholic stupor. He went on to edit *Now*, and subsequently *Frontier*. This person nurtured no illusion about the crowd he was addressing; he knew of their weaknesses and foibles, of their escapism and propensity to betrayal. Most of the time, he felt an almost physical revulsion towards them. How could he, however, ignore, warts and all, their historical role? An individual is a non-descript journeyman in Marx's sack of potatoes. His contribution to the social process is strictly delimited, and mostly inert. But he is an integral element of the mass too, the mass which coalesces with velocity and produces such thunderous momentum. One is thus out of it, and one is also in it. A part of the crowd will misunderstand you, are you

Cinna the poet or Cinna the philosopher, they will pillory you either for your supposedly bad verses or for your supposedly worthless speculations. Sometimes they will suspect you to be the officially consecrated town cynic. You will be lonely, without funds, often without friends. Despite this, however, you have to be true to yourself. So, even though he left his poetry behind, Samar Sen took to what passes for anti-establishment journalism. And he stuck to it. As the signals changed, those who would listen to him thinned, and thinned further. Which was a great thing for him. To be at the receiving end of adulation was never his cup of tea. There was this amusing episode during the halcyon days of *Now*. Almost every week the sales of the journal kept mounting. It caused consternation to the owners of the paper; because of the perfidy of the editor, who outwardly was a gentleman, the leftists had sneaked themselves in and run away with their paper. The burgeoning sales caused alarm to Samar Sen too. Was not the rising demand a sure sign that he was being trapped into conformism, even though it might be of the right, that is, the 'left', variety?

It was fortunate for Samar Sen that the owners saved him from the predicament; they sacked him from *Now*. With *Frontier*, it was a narrow, desolate furrow. The revolutionaries who took to the fields and ravines, and occasionally to synoptic urban terrorism, proved no match for the centralized might of state power. Romantic violence soon yields place, to romantic frustration, and frustration lays bare the feudal infrastructure of those whose emotions are largely derivatives of the intellect. The revolutionaries, without waiting for much too long, started tearing one another apart. Samar Sen and his *Frontier* watched the spectacle from a ringside seat. Somehow; he survived the Emergency and its aftermath. He commented, with sardonic dispassion, on the second coming of Indira Gandhi. He maintained his lonely watch even as the Indian republic, as put together by the British, entered the seemingly final phase of

disintegration. Perhaps he would have enjoyed it more had the material conditions of existence been a shade less strenuous. There lay the contradiction of his choice. Rather, he chose the contradiction. No compromise with either the entrenched ones on populism, it had therefore to be a difficult, hand to mouth existence, as he tried to keep the paper afloat, week after uncertain week sans advertisements and confronted by the spectre of a fast dwindling readership: Samar Sen struggled, but he also complained of the general breakdown. He gloated and complained. That was the archetypal Bengali he had bitingly written about in the past, who will eat the counterpart of the English cake and have it too. In Samar Sen's case, he would neither eat the cake nor prefer to have it.

It is a very occasional lapse, the specific weakness of the substratum, confessed only to a handful of personal friends. He went proudly to his lonely funeral. No populace followed him, no procession of cars, none of banners or festoons. Even the crematorium was deserted. Samar Sen did not have to wait. His cerebral allegiance was to the crowd, he wrote of the vindication of the human condition of which history crows about, but he preferred to stay away from the crowd. It was a matter of private conscience. In the empty crematorium, no intermission of waiting time, his frailest physical frame was, without ceremony, shoved into the oven. It burned quickly. Some quality of greatness was consumed by the flames. Few cared. And, for the present, any' historical assessment belongs to history.

It was a crowded weekend though. The preceding day, in New Delhi, another editor, and another fighter, although of a different genre, called it a day. Romesh Thapar was as different from Samar Sen as chalk is from cheese. True, both had been, once upon a time, on the fringes of the communist party. But, after a while, they went their particular ways and came to edit different kinds of journals. Romesh Thapar, partly perhaps goaded by accident, ended up as the social conscience of the

superstructure. Honest, ebullient, assertive, the eternal eager beaver, he discovered themes for himself. Whatever the issue, he would bring to it an instant dedication. If, in the late forties, it was crossing swords in the cause of the party and the famous fight against the newly-entrenched Congress censors, in the later years other battles centred on peripheral concerns which occupied the nation's capital. He too came to his private grief because, at some point, he took the tenets of the Indian Constitution at their face value. Here was a man full of Punjabi passion, opening out, all the while, all his windows, and always believing in the next door neighbour. It was only natural that, on numerous occasions, he would be disappointed. However, there was no relenting of his vigour. He had moved far away from his past upheld Marxism, and took a liking to the imagery of a world amenable: to non-structural engineering. He would shuffle, back and forth, back and forth, from the new international order to Kashmir, from global food problems to Akali politics, from perceptions of sub-continental stirrings to Japan's technological leaps, from the naissance of trans-Jamuna fascism to ecological issues. His *Seminar* reflected this congenital restlessness, marked by an incorrigible romantic spirit.

This was romanticism of the Lahore Government College species, it always had an empirical content. Romesh would be in scampering hurry to derive lessons, to draw paradigms and put the paradigms to use. What is the point of being up and about if you are unable to change the nation and the world?

There was, however, that hard core of integrity which even his noisy exuberance could not quite drown. This integrity persuaded him to walk away from the lady-you-know-who's kitchen, it persuaded him to shut down *Seminar* during the Emergency, it made him recognize talent and comrades-in-battle in humble, unlikely places. He could easily have been a snob, a man of property strutting about in the manner of a man of property. He chose to stand apart. Notwithstanding the disbelief

of these who have culled a profession out of disbelief, perhaps the early years in the communist party had left a permanent imprimatur; the party teaches you to care, it teaches you to look beyond your subjective confines, to share with others, because to share is also to receive.

One's consciousness is the product of one's being, and Romesh Thapar was in the thick of New Delhi's being. It could not but drain, bit by bit and drop by drop, one's faith and cheer. In recent years, even his famous optimism was wearing off.

This showed in what he wrote, and in the private confessions he made. As *Footpath* still bears witness, since he thought that could advance the cause, he did not at one time flinch from entering even the films. In the twilight of Bofors, he must of late have been asking himself, what is the cause?

There was another reality – contemplating Romesh Thapar without his wife Raj, by his side. Romesh, from the second week of April onwards, must have been considering it all somewhat pointless. Without Raj, he was bereft of his co-ordinates, a frame minus content. One mourns, because one will miss, for one's residual life span, the warmth of his company and the generosity which was so extraordinarily all-embracing, but, for his sake, one is almost graceful that this happened, that he could himself get away within a bare interval of four months following her departure, that he did not have to plod on, without her, for months and years on end.

One nonetheless can be selfish. For someone who is scribbling these inconsequential notes, it can still be a matter of some consequence to have to go through, within the space of a bare eighteen hours, the trauma of the passing of two dearest friends. You will not wish it to happen to your deadliest enemy. No two men could be more dissimilar, but both men could teach you a great deal about integrity.

AUGUST, 1987

## DID SHE NOT DIE THE DAY SARTRE DID?

A wave of sadness; a flurry of nostalgia for the halcyon fifties and sixties; for those manning the barricade for the women's cause, an occasion to take the pledge afresh. But, beyond these rituals, what else? Simone de Beauvoir passed away, this month, almost to the day six years after Jean Paul Sartre's passing. However, can one flinch from acknowledging the harsh reality: did she not in fact die the day Sartre died? These past six years were irrelevant, she might as well not have been. Apart from in the narrowest physical sense, she had ceased to exist, she was defunct as of 15 April 1980. During these half a dozen years, her only creative work, if you would permit to call it that was the one chronicling her farewell to Sartre. It makes grisly reading, the blow-by-blow account of the gradual decay of the physical and mental faculties of one of twentieth century's most remarkable men. But *Les Cérémonies des Adieux* is grisly reading for another reason too: as it describes Sartre's fading away, it also describes the collapse of Simone de Beauvoir's own persona. The facade of a clinical approach to what was happening to Sartre does not quite succeed in concealing the enormity of the other tragedy taking place at the same time: Sartre's death stripped de Beauvoir of her contexture; without Sartre, her being; was threatened with nothingness.

For one who wrote *Le Deuxième Sexe*, who was at her existential best in *Les Mandarins*, this was defeat. Nothing could

be more scandalous for the articulator of a philosophical position which has had revolutionary significance for one-half of the human population. We revolt, therefore we are. We revoke our love, therefore we are. We are bound by passion; we demarcate ourselves by disowning passion. Women will no longer be made, henceforth they too will be creations of the first genre, they themselves will construct their destiny. Women will at last be free. \*

For did not Sartre acknowledge this triumph of woman? Was not her relationship with him free and equal and without commitment? Did they not, in all the battles they fought over the decades, political, social, individual, never deviate from this principle? You have liberated yourself, you control your existence, you control your daily perambulation. Society may be outraged by our flaunting of the existential self, but is not society what you decide to make it into, it is part of your being, just as you are part of society's being. Convention is what convention does, and it is within your command to decide what it is to be asked to do. The female of the species will no longer be in the image of the male, her loyalty is only to herself, and passion has to be re-defined to include dispassion. Did she not assert her freedom, did she not go away to have her fling with Nelson Algren, merely to prove the point? Did not all her writings concentrate on this single, essential issue: you own yourself, none else has the right to claim you?

Did not Sartre accept all this? Who does not know there was a convergence of the philosophical positions held by the two individuals? It was sheer coincidence that one of them was a woman and the other a man; the more important thing was that they held identical views on the human commitments in an age of reason. Once they accepted each other on the basis of total forthrightness, it was the beginning of an idyll and folklore. The span of the idyll stretched almost fifty years from the early 1930s till the day Sartre died. The binding cement of love is infidelity,

the rebel is the most complete social man, and the dialectics of the human soul precedes, and determines, the dialectics of society. These are the canons of existential living; they have to be put in practice. Sartre and de Beauvoir, particularly de Beauvoir, set out on a demonstrative binge. It would be both cruel and unfair to dub what they did as exhibitionism. In the heady days, when you live your philosophy, reality and illusion tend to interchange. You assert your philosophy by your being. The courage to be non-blase is not given to everyone. Perhaps Sartre and de Beauvoir gathered courage from one another; this, after all, ought to be the touchstone of a free companionable relationship.

A doubt, however, creeps in. If you draw encouragement from your companion, are not you compromising yourself? However much you try, there is apparently no escape here from the cul de sac of existential philosophy. You defy society, yet you cannot deny society: the intractable ambivalence of the situation bogs you down. If despite your assertion of total freedom, you are nonetheless a speck in the social process, how do you then separate illusion from reality, how do you prove the uniqueness of your being? And how do you avoid facing the terrible, terrible sequence of this particular syllogism: true, Sartre and de Beauvoir set themselves as companions, companions with equal prerogatives and equal irresponsibilities, and, to clinch the claim, they paraded themselves, went through the motion of proving their existential beliefs; is the issue, however, resolved? How does one know that it is not the echo principle which is at work? Philosophical inference has foundations which are even shakier than those regulating statistical inference; the identification of roots and the unscrambling of sources are complex assignments; it is easy to denounce a proposition, it may be horrifyingly difficult to disprove it. So, what of it, suppose it is held that Simone de Beauvoir was an echo of Jean-Paul Sartre, her philosophy was derivative, her flutters and expostulations were

pre-determined by Sartre's thoughts and writings, even she, Simone de Beauvoir, was, alas, made, and not born?

Whether or not the tragedy of the *Second Sex*, it certainly was the tragedy of Simone de Beauvoir. She was keen to prove as much to herself as to others that she was not a wife to Sartre, but a companion. One is not sure that she succeeded in the task. Marriage is scarcely the bare phenomenon of going through a ritual. It is the behavioural pattern which matters, few other things do. Sartre and de Beauvoir kept their separate apartments; occasionally, they had their separate affairs. But was not all this again paying homage to convention, the convention that married couples have to remain loyal to each other forever, while unmarried ones do not have to? If a couple, through mutual agreement, decide to flout such conventions, it is not proved, that they have ceased to be a couple. A voluntary arrangement to come together when they want and move away again when they want cannot by itself thwart the man-wife relationship. The Sartre-Beauvoir claim may therefore well be considered by many as misconceived. Those with a predilection for more explicit ways of expressing themselves could even go to the length of sneering: poseurs are no philosophers.

The companion in effect became a wife, and this became Simone de Beauvoir's epilogue. Do you append the blame for it on the male of the species? Was Jean-Paul Sartre responsible for Simone de Beauvoir's filling in the secondary role in the relationship? One, alas, has to be singlemindedly objective here. Even allowing for the stochastic element in pairing, was not de Beauvoir's slippage into the secondary role natural, on the assumption that the ordinal ranking is always in accordance with the relative richness of minds and the relative sharpness of intellects? There can be no question that Sartre was the dominant partner and this dominance had little to do with the maleness of his sex; he overpowered her by his sheer brilliance and creative prowess, a fact so candidly admitted in her assorted

autobiographical notes. True, the Sartre-de Beauvoir arrangement did not, could not, prove that woman will always play a subdued role in such a relationship. That would be an absurd claim to make, easily refutable, the annals of philosophy, science and literature will bear contrary witness. No, the tragedy was very specific, it did not directly affect her philosophy, its only victim was Simone de Beauvoir herself.

Yet, further questions will be raised. Is there much point in interposing a philosophy against biology? For phenomena such as oppression and exploitation are the staple of the historical process which determines the destiny of man. The specificity of biology is the only additional element to differentiate the dialectics of the second sex. However much you and I may rail, there is no escape from the tyranny of this specificity; while each other element of exploitation can be tackled on the plane of human endeavour, this one cannot be. That the *Second Sex* is so described is an accident of culture, itself the outcome of the historical process; with very little bending of effort, it can be redesigned as the Other Sex. The physical attributes of the sexes, however, will not be altered thereby; mounting tantrums against Nature are for the present non-productive indulgences, whether progress in bio-physics and the molecular sciences will, in the course of the next couple of thousand years, make a breakthrough, can only be speculated upon.

For Simone de Beauvoir, as life reached its denouement, it was thus a kind of double tragedy. Read her adieu to Sartre, never mind the foundation of existential faith, the companion had been rendered into the wife. It is a magnificent story of an immutable fidelity, but it is also a magnificent negation of the belief which, through intellection, she had arrived at and had dug herself in. In the process, she also exposed the precarious basis of her sexual philosophy. You can render the *Second Sex* into the Other Sex, but whether you can travel beyond the semantic detour is hardly an issue of philosophical assertion

waiting to be transformed, through active combat, into an empirical reality; that will depend upon the forces of nature, much beyond the force of circumstances shaping the hurly-burly of existential living. In the placement of history, Simone de Beauvoir will at most be a footnote to Jean-Paul Sartre. One can hardly conceive a greater affront to the Second Sex, but there it is.

APRIL, 1986

### MORALITY AND THE FUCHS CASE

Why turn into commonplace an issue of great philosophical import? True, the precise usage of the expression 'traitor' has always been a little uncertain; it was, and continues to be a catch 22. One can be a traitor in the conventional sense, that is, to the nation. Traitors of this species, if one is to believe this country's prime minister, are a dime a dozen; they therefore cease to be interesting. The reality is, however, hardly that simple. For one can be a traitor to friends too, or to a cause, or to an ideology—or at least to a particular interpretation of the ideology. The problem an ideologue faces the classical problem, you might almost say is over the decision he or she has to take; conscience no doubt is king, but what should be the verdict of conscience when the critical moment of decision-making arrives? Does one turn a traitor to one's country, to one's friends, or to one's ideology? By its very nature it is going to be an act of great betrayal, but whom does one betray, the cause, the country, or one's personal friends? Or could it be that one ends up by turning a traitor to one and all?

Consider the case of Klaus Fuchs, who died some months ago in the German Democratic Republic, full of, as they say, years and honours. Son of a liberal minded cleric and a neurotic mother, Fuchs drifted from the youth wing of the Social Democratic Party to the Communist Party in his late teens, and escaped from Germany the day the Reichstag was set on fire in

1933. He ended up in England. The British establishment took care that this young refugee from Nazi persecution was provided with all the opportunities of higher education. Fuchs turned out to be one of the most brilliant theoretical physicists of his generation; he did research in Bristol, moved to Edinburgh, and ended up in Birmingham. On the commencement of the Second World War, he was chosen to join the small group of scientists whom the government asked to carry on clandestine research on the problems of nuclear fission. Once the United States joined the War in December 1941, the separate British and American research activities, concentrating on unravelling the secret of the atom which could lead to the manufacture of a bomb of extraordinary destructive capability, was placed under a collaborative arrangement. Fuchs, who had meanwhile become a British citizen, was amongst the handful of British scientists who were sent across to New York to work on the now famous Manhattan Project on the nuclear bomb. After a while, he was transferred to Los Alamos in New Mexico, where the actual work of assembling the bomb was taking place under the overall guidance of Robert Oppenheimer, culminating in that fearful, magnificent implosion in early 1945, to describe which Oppenheimer quoted from the Upanishads: 'was brighter than a thousand suns'. The atomic bomb arrived. It was duly detonated to annihilate Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan surrendered, the war ended, and Fuchs moved back to England to join the newly established atomic energy research laboratory at Harwell as head of its theoretical physics department.

Fuchs was a bachelor, a quiet, reserved individual, whom wives of colleagues liked to mother, in Bristol as well as Edinburgh, in Birmingham as well as Los Alamos, and later at Harwell. His scientific brilliance was widely acknowledged, and, despite apparent passivity on his side, relationships were formed and friendships established. None amongst his colleagues or their families knew, or even guessed, the secret he carried within

himself. He had remained a communist all along, a passionate ideologue, who believed that the Soviet Union was the only hope for human civilization. He therefore considered it his duty to pass on, on a regular basis, to representatives of the Soviet Union detailed information on the kind of work concerning the nuclear bomb that was being pursued in Britain and America. He had established contact with Soviet agents while in Birmingham itself, and he kept transmitting highly classified information including detailed formulae and diagrams relevant to the manufacture of the bomb, from New York and Los Alamos. Contact with the Soviet agents, thinned out when he joined Harwell, but it was not altogether terminated. It is largely due to detailed briefings from Fuchs that the manufacture of the Soviet bomb could be advanced by as much as a couple of years. In the time scale of the furious Cold War that was on in the late forties and the early fifties, that was an incalculable gain for one side, and an incalculable loss for the other.

Fuchs was found out in 1950, after the Americans were able to break the wartime Soviet wireless code and unscramble the messages that had passed during the war years between Moscow and the Soviet embassy in Washington. Confronted with the charge of espionage, he straightaway confessed. He was almost anxious to come clean, and he came clean. It was at that time suggested that his readiness to confess was perhaps on account of his anxiety to save his colleagues and friends at Birmingham, New York, Los Alamos and Harwell, all of whom would otherwise have continued to be under the cloud of suspicion; he had already betrayed his adopted country, the country which had been so good to him, but he did not want to compound that guilt by creating difficulties for his friends who had, in good faith, accepted him in their hearts. His affirmation that he operated on his own and had no collaborator would bail out all those who had, at some time or other, worked with him or offered him hospitality: this, Fuchs felt – at least it was hinted that

this was how he felt – was the minimum he could do; besides, now that he was in any case caught, acting in this manner would in no way compromise his ideology, so his conscience was clear on that score too, Fuchs made a full confession. He was sent up for trial and was given the maximum sentence under the relevant statute, rigorous imprisonment for fourteen years. One-third of the term was taken off for good conduct, and Fuchs was released at the end of ten years. He flew off to the German Democratic Republic, where he was received warmly and offered a number of prestigious academic and research appointments one after another.

Till now, it is almost a conventional story, an archetypal star of an espionage agent doing the work assigned to him, getting caught, being thrown to prison and quietly migrating on his release to the country on whose behalf he had spied. The only point of departure is the fact that Fuchs did what he did not on account of money, but because of ideological convictions.

This particular case, however, had other ramifications. Fuchs had confessed to the British authorities. Under the law, he could not be extradited to the United States, and the American administration was in no position to bring him to book. Fuchs nonetheless agreed to be interrogated, in British prison, by the American Federal Bureau of Investigation. Were he to refuse to be questioned by the FBI, the latter would have been in a jam. In fact, because McCarthy was already on the rampage in the United States, anti American sentiments were ascendant in Britain, and there was an uproar in parliament at the news that the FBI was being allowed to interrogate a British prisoner. However, since Fuchs had volunteered to speak to the American agency, the controversy died down in due course.

To the Americans too, he came clean. Once more, it could be that he was tortured by his conscience; he was perhaps afraid that, should he hold back anything, or provide the impression he was holding back, his former colleagues in the United States

would not be left in peace by the FBI; that was the period when the American mind was obsessed by the theme of 'guilt by association'. The instant issue for him, then, was not to play Judas to his friends. In the process, though, Fuchs did something whose moral consequences keep reverberating till this day. Anxious to convince the agency that he was cooperating with it to the fullest extent, he identified for the FBI a photograph of his only Soviet contact in the United States, a person whom he knew as 'Raymond'. Thanks to the clue provided by Fuchs, 'Raymond' was tracked down; he turned out to be Harry Gold, a part-time chemist and part-time order-supplier residing in Philadelphia. Through Harry Gold, the FBI reached out to yet another Soviet atom spy, David Green Glass. It is on the testimony of these two testimony which, many suspect, was replete with perjury – that Green Glass' sister-in-law and her husband, Ethel – and Julius Rosenberg were sent to the gallows. It cannot really be said that Fuchs was able to work out the optimum solution to his moral problem. By the manner he cooperated with the FBI, he perhaps succeeded in saving his scientist friends in the States and their families from harassment and social ostracisation. Precisely because he did that, the Rosenbergs whom he did now know and yet who were his ideological colleagues, had to die. He chose not to be a traitor to his friends. By virtue of this particular decision – on his, part, he however, chose to be a traitor to his ideology. Did he choose right? Was he, once having made the choice, at peace with his conscience? Even assuming his conscience ceased to persecute him about whom we do not know – the larger philosophical question remains: was he right?

Once the Fuchs episode reached its finale, at least one other point was clinched. Fuchs had a constructive responsibility for the deaths of the Rosenbergs who, by all accounts, were magnificent communists, calm and strong and tenaciously loyal to their ideology till the very end. By the same measure, Fuchs

was a lapsed ideologue; it was on account of the specific manner he resolved the dialectics of his conscience that two noble and worthy comrades were denied their further living. But the ideology, and the apparatus which supports the ideology, were forgiving enough. A comrade is liable to commit errors, even costly errors. He is a comrade nonetheless. At the end of his period of incarceration, Karl Fuchs, who had meanwhile been divested of his British citizenship, was not a lost soul. His comrades in the German Democratic Republic had shelter and research-cum-academic assignments ready for him. There was a fresh beginning waiting for him, a beginning which, gently and quietly, brought home the message that you and I might occasionally weaken and betray the cause, but the cause does not betray us, the cause is much more generous than our subjective alarms will induce us to concede.

The cynics will not agree. They are still full of Tiananmen Square. One night at Tiananmen Square however does not constitute history. History takes a longer view of both heroes and traitors.

SEPTEMBER, 1989

### A BONFIRE OF HIS IDEAS

THE audacity of little men. Grammarians to a fault, they will not let any historical occasion go by unused. The centenary of P.C. Mahalanobis's birth had to be observed, not for history's sake, but for their own. They were present with their subalterns when the year-long ceremonies got going. The Indian Statistical Institute is an institute of 'national importance'; the statute says so. Do they not *ipso facto*, represent the nation? They therefore have the prerogative to exploit to the hilt the external economies the Mahalanobis celebrations offered. There could be no question of their not daring to dare; the necessary courage could be borrowed, much like the country's accumulated pile of foreign exchange. They came to praise the Professor while making sure that each of the goals he had set his heart on remained aborted. As is now well known in the neighbourhood, native hypocrisy and imported bravado make for a hideous nostrum.

All told, it was commanding performance, intended to gladden the hearts of those who now take the basic and crucial decisions on this nation's economic policies, for the edification of themselves and their *compradors*, from distant years, now buried deep. This phenomenon has not been the doing of an autonomous process. Those at the helm of affairs have gone about the job with a rare thoroughness. The prime minister could thus avail of the opportunity the centenary occasion

provided to make short shrift of planning and the objective of self-reliance. It was time, his stentorian voice informed the assembled cynics, to dispense with ideology, which was, Mahalanobis's Achilles' heel. That megalomaniac academician loved his country, he believed in the potential indivisibility latent in the vast reserve of natural resources that waited to be exploited. Men like him were dangerous. In case they had their way, they would ensure the nation's emergence as a strong economically independent entity. That danger, thank providence, has passed. Certainly for the next half a century or thereabouts, India stood little chance of extricating herself from the external debt trap. The trusteeship of the G-7 countries would therefore continue; follies such as trying to sign cryogenic engine deals in violation of the Missile Technology Control Regime would be brought home by the masters. Whether this skewed sort of equilibrium is sustainable for any length of time, given the tenuous domestic circumstances, is a question that is incapable of detaining small minds. The prime minister and his entourage are happy with the immediate denouement: planning is dead, the apparition of national self-reliance has been successfully put to the sword. A bonfire has been made of all the ideas Mahalanobis stood for. The prime minister could now afford to be expansive in his homage to the man. Neither dead men nor murdered ideas would, hopefully, rise in combat.

To be fair, the sabotage is not of recent occurrence. It started in the decade of the fifties itself, when Mahalanobis was, going by appearances, much the central personality in the domain of policy formulation. Appearances were deceptive. Even at that particular juncture, finance ministers were much abroad. One snatch of memory is eminently reportable. The Professor had the basic data at his fingertips; his syllogisms were without a flaw; he had worked out the inter-industry linkages; he had arranged to have the unit cost calculations done at different levels of capacity utilization and under different assumptions.

Three steel plants with rated capacity of two to two-and-a-half million tonnes were both necessary and viable. The Professor had convinced Jawaharlal Nehru. The bureaucratic resistance had collapsed. The foreign and private sector lobbies had started to get themselves accustomed to wearing long faces. Never, never, ever, however, say die. The ministry of finance was well versed in the knowledge that tomorrow was another day. The incumbent finance minister had a civil service background, with a distinguished tutelage under the British. He was, in addition, addicted to quoting Sanskrit scriptures. Mahalanobis, a mere academic could not possibly be to have it all his way: the prestige of the colonial heritage was at stake. The finance minister gleefully described how he put the first spoke in the wheel. The theoretical exercises on inter industry linkages were all right, but, as minister of finance, he had the moral obligation to take a second look at the projection of demand; after all, with the Korean War petering out, was not a global depression looming? What use would there be for all this steel, the nation could not eat up six or seven million tones of steel every year, year after year; why should we then unnecessarily produce it? Someone had to act as spoiler of the fun – irresponsibly set in motion by Mahalanobis. The finance minister's happiness spilled over; he, as the minister responsible for husbanding the nation's resources, put the first spanner in the works. He demanded fresh calculations of the values of the parameters involved on the demand side of the equation; the projects were, as a result stalled for more than a year. The finance minister could have danced all night. He had succeeded, even if for only a while, in blocking the nation's economic advancement. His cronies must congratulate him; most of them did, barely a few slunk away. It is a small footnote to the chronicle of the times that some years hence this same minister, now without a job, accepted a sinecure position offered to him by the Professor. Magnanimity was the latter's revenge.

Those were nonetheless heady days. Pinpricks were clearly not enough to waylay the Professor. He was not wont to give vent to his emotions in the presence of outsiders. Even so, a good bit of his will-power was propelled by patriotic emotions. He did not flinch from recourse to the weaponry of contempt either when such contempt was called for. Another bit of memory lingers. A meeting of the Planning Commission, with Jawaharlal Nehru presiding, to discuss the contours and contents of the Mahalanobis plan-frame. A pygmy of an Englishman, a former member of the Indian Civil Service, had imagined that the Indian pasture was still eminently grazable even following the formal transfer of power. He stayed back. His decision was applauded by the national leadership with expression of sentiment that was a pot-pourri of neo-colonial fervour and faith in universal brotherhood. The gentleman continued to flourish, and was duly made an advisor to the Planning Commission. He was scandalized no end by the Mahalanobis projections; the scale was much too wide for his taste. What madness was this; India should remain a polite and humble country; the western nations had the wisdom and the expertise; they were willing to extend their benign hand of cooperation; courtesy should beget courtesy, such kindly gestures deserved to be reciprocated by squeamish deference. If India were instead to compete with these countries in the manufacture of basic industrial goods, why, the latter would have good reason to take offence.

Once India embarked on wild silly adventures, epitomized by grandiose five-year plans with targeted annual rates of growth of 5 per cent of thereabouts and a programme placing emphasis on the necessity to produce machines to produce further machines so as to attain complete self-reliance, the country would in no time end up in a mess. It would also in the process squander away the precious sterling balances the benign imperial government had so generously allowed it to accumulate during

the war years. Mahalanobis did not turn a hair; he listened. Once the imperial performance was over, he focused his full fury on the person. He knew his facts, he was in total command of his premises and hypotheses; he was, besides, a proud Indian. His clipped sentences did not for one moment get derailed from the integrity of either thought or syntax. There was nonetheless the unmistakable ring of patriotism in his voice. The colonialists had done enough harm to this country for two centuries; it could now do without them; it had now, the pommies ought to know, a different kind of agenda, aimed to replace economic retardation by economic growth; in case imperial mind-sets encountered some difficulty in adjusting to the notions of accelerated development and social justice and full employment in India, would it not be better if they made themselves scarce?

Perhaps there is a dividing line between scorn and contempt. On that afternoon in that building on Parliament Street at that session presided over by a bemused Jawaharlal Nehru, the dividing line, however, became both irrelevant and indecipherable. The pommy squirmed in his seat; his red face turned redder. However, he was a battle-scarred journeyman; he also read his personal horoscope well. He withdrew to East Africa where the colonies were to prosper for a few more years. He picked up a few thousand hectares of lush farming, and turned himself into a gentleman-farmer. When the country he had settled in had to be conceded its independence in the sixties, the gentleman had to be compensated for his recently acquired property. An international financial institution, you know which one, worked out an extraordinarily generous schedule of compensation and bull-dozed the national government, not yet quite sure of itself, into accepting its provisions. Negotiated freedom had to bear such crosses. This chore of transfer of land and corresponding transfer of compensation money could not be left to the superintendence of the natives; they had got their independence all right, but what did they know of the

complexities of economics and accountancy. The international financial institution had to guide and monitor this particular operation. They needed experienced men for the purpose. The former member of the Indian Civil Service, the erstwhile advisor to the Indian Planning Commission, the too-recent gentleman-farmer who had acquired the right to be compensated, ideally fitted the job description. He was therefore inducted into the international financial institution, and advised it on how to continue to squeeze the surplus out of the East Africans even after they had, at least nominally, received their freedom. His passion for the Raj, however, did not ebb away. When Indira Gandhi declared her Emergency, he wrote to the London *Economist* in praise of the lady's decision – was she not a real empress in the making, and would she not recall the imperial administrators?

It took some more time but, finally, East Africa has come to India. The colonials, manning the ramparts of the international financial agencies, have taken over the country. They have liquidated planning and five-year plans; the building which housed the Planning Commission still exists, but the conference rooms are all deserted. Some routine essays continue to be written, but planning has been abandoned both as a modality and as a goal. The public sector is scuttled, development outlay is cut back; that does not, however, mean that those inclined to indulge in the pastime of constructing plan models are to be discouraged. The Mahalanobis Centenary should, however marginally, therefore augment the flow of research funds which could go as input towards the formulation of whimsical models with far-out assumptions. Neat-looking papers, heavily cluttered with different equations and matrix algebra, will get composed; some of these will, after varying periods of waiting, no doubt get published in this journal. The homage to Mahalanobis will thereby be considered as duly accomplished.

The rituals could not be faulted. The inauguration of the

centenary celebrations by the nation's prime minister, no less, and twenty or thirty odd research papers to be churned out at the end of the year the collective conscience should be adequately assuaged. Meanwhile, the objective of self-reliant growth would be even more comprehensively ditched. Availing of the occasion, and overcome by a sense of history, the prime minister was expansive enough to let the nation into the secret: ideology was passé, and from now on it was the epoch of private initiative and global intercourse.

We are thus officially listed as a dependent nation; our present rulers are determined to ensure that we do not stray away from that destiny. According to statisticians, during the first five decades of this about-to-end century, the per capita income in the country had remained invariant. It was, in other words, a state of economic stagnancy. In the nineteenth century, when colonialism and imperialism were in fullest bloom, there was actually, the same statisticians suggest, a perceptible economic retardation, that is to say, a substantial fall in per capita income. Perception of this phenomenon had inspired Dadabhai Naoroji to launch his Drain Theory. We are back to the nineteenth century, even if the calendar says we are on the threshold of the twenty-first. The calendar can be misleading, as misleading as the celebrations currently on to offer tribute to the memory of Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis. The intent is not to praise him, but to ridicule him. Were they still around, the finance minister of yore, and those bureaucrats of the colonial era, they could indeed have danced all night.

JULY, 1993

## SHE BROUGHT IT OFF

Is it only the old left behind who mourn for the old who depart from the scene? Kanan Devi, the first great singing star produced by the country's film industry, the heartthrob of millions in the thirties and the forties, died quietly in Calcutta last month. There were few wreaths for her. The contrast with the frenzy which seized the city barely four months ago, when Satyajit Ray passed away, could not be more glaring. Ray was contemporary. He had just received an Oscar in recognition of his 'life-time' achievement. He had an honoris causa Doctorate of Literature from Oxford, and did not Monsieur Mitterrand come all the way to this wretched city to confer on him the Legion of Honour? Kanan Devi, the Calcutta crowd decided, did not belong to that league. In any event, very few are left in the field who have the competence to assess the social and cultural significance of a phenomenon like her. Of late, she had increasingly given the impression of being a benign old lady, seen, now and then, on public occasions. Her presence on such occasions was defined ambivalently. Everyone tried to be nice to her. Quite as transparently, she tried to be nice to everyone. Perhaps that was the role she was reduced to. When she died, it caused no undying emotions, Calcutta cut out the hoopla. A nice old lady is dead. Nice old ladies die by the dozen everyday. A couple of nostalgia-laden letters in the newspapers, and the wake for Kanan Devi was over.

Shall we coin an expression and say she should have died here before? Half a century ago, she spelled charm, glamour, dazzle, grace to India's fledgling middle class. That class has vanished, or changed beyond description, since Independence. Kanan Devi herself too changed beyond description. There was not the faintest trace, in the more recent years, of any leftover glamour about her. She was, in the past couple of decades, a vague, non-fussy old lady, a bit like Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Little curiosity was expended on her. She died and did not create any fuss by her dying either.

The obituaries were brief, as brief as the funeral procession. These referred to the travails she had to undergo in her early career, the films she had starred in, her marriage to one who was, at the time the nuptials took place, *aide-de-camp* to the governor of the state, and her many philanthropic gestures. None of the references was wrong; the main story, however, remained untold. It was a case of either selective amnesia or a delicately exercised social censorship.

Kanan Devi was, in the beginning, Kananbala, born on the flip side of society. No painstaking research could ever reveal who her father was. Those who wrote on her were careful about this fact. She had good looks and a good singing voice. It was still the early days for the industry; the films were still silent. The royal sum of five rupees was all Kananbala received for her first film role. From then on, it was a long, hard battle. The glamour came later, the beauty and charm blossomed only with the years. In that phase, she had to, literally, slave away. Her days and weeks constituted a glaring aspect of child labour. What she nonetheless had in plenty, apart from her grit, was dignity. She was born in the wrong quarters, but she would not take insults lying down. Each humiliation treatment she received steeled her resolve. It was very much an Eliza Doolittle story in real life, but with a difference. There was no Professor Higgins around, Kananbala was her own producer, she made the transformation into the

persona of Kanan Devi on her own. True, a handful of kindly gentlemen, avuncular to the hilt, helped her on the way, some trained her in music, others tutored her on diction and gait. The basic talent was, however, her own, and what catapulted her to stardom was her special genre of determination. It was an unusual cross of innocence with oomph. Her innocence, everyone who knew her during those years vouchsafed, was genuine; that innocence she retained even when she became rich and famous. The glamour was the product of the latent genius which she learnt to cultivate. She almost willed herself to reach the portals of brilliance. Beauty, oomph and dignity; the combination of the three was irresistible. As the talkies arrived, she became the instant heroine to millions. She spoke the dialogue in both Bengali and Hindi; she sang too in both Bengali and Hindi. The style was her own, and it captivated. Kanbanbala in a short while became dysfunctional; Kanan Devi took over.

Newspapers have obliterated from the pages of history what ought to be still regarded as her most significant achievement. Kanbanbala chose to smash social barriers. She aimed high, very high, and she brought it off. She married right into Bengali aristocracy. She thereby got even with society. She entrapped the son of one who was widely known to be the primmest of the prim amongst the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj. Heramba Chandra Maitra, puritan *par excellence*, scholar *par excellence*, and principal of a college which was the citadel of Brahmo orthodoxy. Legions of stories were afloat in Calcutta about Heramba Chandra Maitra's conservatism and inflexibility. Kanan Devi's targeting therefore had a touch of unbelievable brilliance. She must have hugely enjoyed the victory; Bengali upper class, prudery had its comeuppance. That, no question, was her outstanding triumph. Heramba Chandra Maitra's daughter happened to be married to Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis of D2 Statistic, Mahalanobis Distance and Inter-penetrating Sample fame, the founder of the Indian Statistical Institute, and

progenitor of the Mahalanobis plan model currently much reviled by free market lovers. By the magic of a couple of signatures at the marriage registrar's office, Heramba Chandra Maitra, who was already father-in-law to P.C. Mahalanobis, became the father-in-law of Kanan Devi as well. Bengalis only retrospectively realized the significance of Anno Domini 1941: in January of that year, Subhas Chandra Bose slipped away to Germany, and from then on to the destiny of the Indian National Army and the Battle of Imphal, and in December, Kanan Devi, nee Kanbanbala, became daughter-in-law to Heramba Chandra Maitra. Social history was shaken to its roots; society, however, got to know of this quake with a considerable time-lag.

Kanan Devi ordained parallel lines to meet. No record, alas, exists about how the union, not of two individuals as such, but of two disparate social categories, worked out in practice. Obviously it did not, for the marriage was formally over by the late forties. In her carefully done autobiography, Kanan Devi edited out all references to this, her first marriage. Maitra's son was always self-effacing and circumspect. His sister, Rani Mahalanobis, was certainly not so. But even she, otherwise so chirpy in her comments on men and events, dexterously backed away from making any mention of Kanan Devi. As for Professor Mahalanobis, his imperial hauteur would preclude the most daring from making enquiries.

Perhaps the twain did not meet. But whether it did or not, history had already been created. P.C. Mahalanobis and his wife were close to Rabindranath Tagore and Santiniketan. Kanan Devi had thus succeeded in scaling the ultimate heights; upper class Bengali culture was up for her grabs. Kanbanbala had made it. There were enough indications initially that she received some sort of acceptance, grudging or otherwise, from the circle of the hoity-toity she broke into. When, at the end of the Second World War, Mahalanobis and his wife went on an extensive jaunt to Europe and the United States, Kanan Devi accompanied them.

Mahalanobis chose to visit his alma mater, Cambridge; Kanan Devi was with him, sauntering inside the King's College chapel and along their backs, resident Indian students gawked at the sight, not quite believing their eyes. Kanan Devi decided to return the compliments to her then brother-in-law; she persuaded Mahalanobis to accompany her to Hollywood. The Los Angeles tabloids carried a brief news item: India's glamour queen had visited the MGM studios, she was chaperoned by a statistician from Calcutta.

Did that hurt Mahalanobis's ego? Was that trifle of an episode the beginning of the detumescence? None is any longer alive to unravel the true story. Kanan Devi dissolved her marriage with characteristic dignity; the gossip columnists had neither the opportunity nor the courage to indulge in speculation. Perhaps the marriage was a non-success for a very specific reason. Kanan Devi was, despite everything, her mother's daughter. Hindu religiosity is organically linked to the mores which prevail in Bengali society's nether regions. Kanan Devi never got out of that particular mind-set; she, almost certainly, did not want to get out of it either. Brahmo sophistition could not reconcile with her brand of deity fetishism, and vice versa. Perhaps the Maitras and the Mahalanobises had their hang-ups, perhaps she had her own: conceivably there were more intimate, personal factors involved. But Kanan Devi, nee Kanbanbala, made her point: she was not one to be given the short shrift.

When she contracted the second marriage, she had no further points to prove. The establishment had to take her presence in their midst for granted. She therefore opted for stability, and Bengali Hindu orthodoxy. This was presumably her way of returning to her childhood. Those were lean times, near-starvation times, her mother used to scrounge for some food and for some money; hemmed in by hopelessness, the mother clung to the worship of deities; the domesticated Hindu god, be it Siva

or be it Narayana, would surely protect the mother and the daughter from the hyenas prowling outside.

The daughter, Kanbanbala, must have convinced herself that it was on account of the deity's blessing that she could cross, one after another, so many hurdles in life and arrive where she did. Soon after the second marriage, she began to withdraw from the limelight. She must have gone through a conversion of a sort. She was no longer the film star, she took on a different identity, she became an extraordinarily religious minded Hindu housewife, given to piety and neighbourliness. There was one Kanbanbala, but two Kanan Devis. The two Kanan Devis were as different as chalk is from cheese. The glamour girl was gone; the kind-looking middle-class lady took over.

That perhaps provides the clue to the absence of emotion at her passing. Having achieved what she wanted to achieve, two score years ago Kanan Devi decided to get rid of the glamour girl in her. She thus became one of the earliest practitioners of the right to die. The lady who was around, who would now and then attend meetings and seminars, or sit next to you with a benign smile radiating across her countenance, had de-linked herself totally from her past. She was altogether a different persona. Kanan Devi strived equally hard to reach this final target in her career. She succeeded; she became very ordinary. No flowers for ordinary ladies; they do not deserve a boisterous funeral procession either.

AUGUST, 1992

## MORALITY BECOMES COMMITMENT

Eastern Europe is having its fill of liberation and liberalization. Even as multi-party elections are changing the face of the politics, the mines are closing in Silesia; the volume of unemployment in Poland has touched half a million. That is not enough; more mines must close, as like they did in good capitalist lands such as Britain and France, and the number of the jobless must proceed to a million of more, which will clinch the point that the free market system has come into its own. If the workers in Silesia are without work, why, they should simply move out of that province; they will perhaps have to wait patiently, half a dozen years before they get picked up again. Meanwhile, they should train themselves to be hairdressers or join similar nondescript trades. Once the liberal ethos really gets going and inequalities in income and wealth become integral to the structure, the East European countries will each acquire a booming services sector; jobs will then be a plenty; all that will be needed then is re-training and re-tooling of working men and women. In the interim, they must be part of the informal sector, or go through the experience of frictional unemployment. Capitalism arrives in a package; in order that one might enjoy the delight of the freedom of choice which the system throws up, one must accept the risk of being without any ostensible means of livelihood for an indeterminable number of years. Since those abominations socialism was known by (such as public subsidies and social security arrangements), will be

severely cut back in the re-structured economies, it will be impossible to avoid a spell of deprivation for x, y or z. Nascent capitalism, who does not know, has its growing pangs; it is all there in Charles Dickens.

Leave the East Europeans to their fate; they have chosen their version of freedom; they, in any case, have little time to ruminate over the fate which may overtake the international socialist movement as a consequence of their headlong rush to capitalism. The international socialist movement, or what remains of it, can only return the compliment, and move according to its own inclinations. The great aching at this moment, it is thus entirely right, is for Daniel Ortega and his band of comrades. The capitulation of the Nicaraguans following the long, ruthless American encirclement, and not the dimming of the socialist lights on the other side of Europe, heralds the tragedy of the nineties. Speculation will persist whether the demoralization set in motion by East European developments was not at least partly responsible for the Sandinistas going down to defeat in the electoral batter. These extraordinarily brave people could not quite make it in the home stretch. That hardly detracts from the quality of their heroism. If there is to be any flying half-mast of an allegorical flag, it has to be in tribute to the great Nicaraguans. They will, rest assured, live to fight another day.

True, no people are an island – recent events in the so-called old and new worlds do not annul the proposition either. The dream of socialism, and the humanism it embodies, will continue to straddle countries and continents. Even so, will it not be, for some while, more practical for socialist ideologues in what is described as the third world to concern themselves a little less with the storm blowing across perestroika-struck lands, and concentrate on happenings nearer home? Predominant numbers amongst exploited humanity belong, after all, to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Let the East Europeans rediscover joyousness in

the wombs of feudalism and capitalism; the people in the poorer lands will have other wars to pursue.

From the general to the particular. In this neighbourhood two veterans of the socialist movement passed away in recent weeks. Of the two, Saroj Mukherjee, who used to boast playfully that, after B.T. Ranadive, he had held the party card the longest in this country, received wide public acclaim in his later years; he ended up as secretary of the state unit of the party and a member of its national polit-bureau. Following his death, messages of condolence have reached and are still reaching from distant territories. The other party person who died, victim of a sudden massive cardiac seizure, was less known, because he wanted it that way. Samarendranath Sanyal was secretary of a district unit of the party for the past dozen years; he did not travel much, and comrades from other states could identify him only by his beard, which was extraordinarily long and flowing, always wafting in the air. The beard was bereft, however, of any Shavian haughtiness. It was benignly white, and suggested the quiet gentleness one is wont to associate with a late nineteenth or early twentieth century scion of the Tagore household. Sanyal was soft-spoken, his words would drop almost like flower petals, and they seemingly were not intended to hurt even a fly. Even as he would speak, there would be a twinkle in the eye; it was as if the uncle next door is taking you into confidence over the imminence of a village prank. This is where the puzzle lay. Those accustomed to reading non-fiction works on commissars of Slav vintage would have suffered from a tremendous shock of non-recognition had they chanced to come across Sanyal. A communist party functionary, everybody assumes, is a rigid disciplinarian. Sanyal, no question, could be stern, but he would be affectionate in equal measure. In case a comrade had committed a mistake, or muffed an assignment, the uncle of the commissar would draw him or her aside; what would follow would be chastisement of a sort, but devoid of sting. Unless one

had done something which was purposely vicious, had deliberately violated party norms, despite past warnings and admonitions, not once, but several times, one could feel secure and comfortable with Matar-da, the pet name by which Sanyal was known all over the state. The party is a hard-core mass, it aims at the destruction of the system, it has actively connived at violent activities in the past and, should the cause so necessitate, would be prepared for further bouts of gory violence. The party's adherence to the principle of democratic centralism carries one essential message; every member, howsoever senior or howsoever a sophomore, will be given every indulgence to speak his or her mind on different issues. Once a particular decision is reached on any matter at any level, however, it has to be scrupulously adhered to by all members, including even by those who greatly disagree with both its premises and its conclusions; should any member deviate from this discipline, he will be weeded out. This iron-clad rule enables the party to survive, and to keep itself prepared to fight and fight again irrespective of the severest external circumstances. By any definition it is near-regimentation; yet, within this milieu, you chance upon Matar-da, the spitting image of the neighbourhood uncle, drawing you aside and giving you a dressing down once you had committed a *faux pas*; the dressing down is done with such civility that, at the end of it, you do not really mind it at all.

It is Sanyal, and others like him, who built the left movement into what it is around these parts. He sprang from a well-known professional Brahmin family in the district. In the twenties and the thirties, young people from such families joined the Congress movement as a matter of course; they picketed the shops selling British merchandise, shouted the appropriate slogans, organized the processions, threw the occasional bomb. They were nabbed by the police even before they learnt to handle the Mauser pistol in the right way or had thrown their first bombs. They thronged the prisons. A good many amongst

them read avidly Marxist texts smuggled into prison cells. They duly turned communists. Once a communist, one went through the treadmill of discipline, rigorous and yet more rigorous discipline. One was taught the rudiments of political craftsmanship even as one was made to learn about Marx's magnificent social dynamics, and was led through narrations of the epics of class wars and the inevitable collapses of degenerate systems; one was made aware of the problems faced by the peasantry and the working class; one grasped some rudiments of bread and butter economics, and got soaked in the philosophy as well as praxis of commune existence, for a left cadre exists not for himself or herself, but for others. He or she denies himself or herself for the sake of comrades; he or she is often purposely made to go through the harsh process of self-abnegation because, in the view of the party, that is, for a greenhorn of a young cadre, a kind of a crash course on what serving the cause of the people implies.

These young dream-makers, a whole bunch of them, were let out of prison in the late thirties or the early forties. They immediately lost themselves in the crowd. They had a gleam in their eyes; they had a world to conquer; they must free the nation from foreign bondage, and must re-do the system along lines hinted at by their ideology. They had dollops of courage and grit; while in prison, they learnt how to combine this grit with humility. Once emptied from the jails, they dissolved in the crowd. They began to live next to the landless, rack-rented peasantry, the fishermen and the village artisans, or with dock workers and jute workers and tea garden labour and railwaymen; they found their way into government and mercantile officers, amongst teachers in schools and colleges, and in neighbourhood clubs. When the refugees began to arrive from across East Pakistan, the latest entrants into the sprawling unending category of the dispossessed, the left cadres were immediately there, commiserating with them, steeling them with the courage called

for to fight for their rights. It was an intense phase of struggle and dedication. The young cadres moved in and out of prison as battles were joined with the authorities; they learnt to swim with the masses. Over a total span of four decades or more, it was an uninterrupted story of total commitment to the cause of the people.

That is how the party, and the movement spearheaded by it, got built in this corner of the country. It was built by individuals such as Sanyal, individuals whose goodness was always to the fore, and who matured and grew old along with the party. A good communist must, to begin with, be a good person. These exceptionally good persons, through decade after painstaking decade, lived with the people, earned their trust, mobilized them, taught them to fight unitedly for the cause, convinced them that the party lives for them, and, should the necessity arise, its cadres and leaders will die for them too, while fighting their class battles. Men like Matar-da who were not known outside the state or even across the district line, shaped the party into what it is. When there is the tolling of the bell, men like Sanyal depart, but the inheritance, the party, lives on.

East European events cause sorrow, but do not therefore cast much of a shadow over here; the roots of the movement are much too deep to be shaken by events several thousand miles away. One little lesson nonetheless filters through: pride and socialism do not go together; hauteur corrupts, and absolute hauteur corrupts absolutely. Otherwise the mourning here is for saints like Sanyal, and for the distant Sandinistas. Certainly not for those who considered themselves stripped of liberty because their television screen did not beam any late-night pornographic films.

## A CYNIC IN THE COLONY OF BELIEVERS

A letter from Mrinalini Sarabhai to newspaper editors, full of, as they say, anger and anguish. The Reserve Bank of India has, in her view, done an outrageous thing by clamping the kind of restrictions it has clamped on the import of books. Books are synonymous with enlightenment. They hint of joy and pleasures which lift existence on to a superior plane. Life will not be worth living in case import of copies of the latest Gabriel Marquez or of the latest issue of *Granta* becomes impossible because of the preconditions imposed by the country's central bank. Leave out literature, what about the crucial areas of mathematical speculation and technology; till as long as the Reserve Bank ruling continues, our new generation will be deprived of the opportunity to be acquainted, on an instant basis, with developments in, for instance, molecular biology and computer science. The Reserve Bank's decision, Mrinalini Sarabhai does not have the least doubt, is a cruel blow against civilization.

And yet very few, including Mrinalini Sarabhai herself, will be prepared to acknowledge the nexus between the nation's embracing, wholesale, the ideology of economic liberalism and its current inability to buy books freely from overseas. Had our policy formulators, kibitzed at one end by the domestic industrial and trade lobby, and at the other by foreign credit-giving institutions, not gone on a wild import spree in the roaring 1980s, there would have been today no exchange crunch

and no external debt trap, and books would have therefore continued to come in. But those who mattered, influenced as much by Margaret Thatcher as by perestroika, preferred to go on a liberal binge. The outcome is the present immiseration and the symbiosis between India and the begging bowl. We can now afford to indulge in neither Marquez nor Otcenasek, nor Kundera or Havel. Also consider the irony of it. Since there are going to be no books to read, time will be free, time to decide on the organic link between misguided economic policy and bookless-ness. Or, shall we say, between sin and culpability? The recently interred Graham Greene would perhaps have expressed it in yet another form, as the dialectics of sin and atonement.

We have stumbled on a familiar facet of human civilization. Take into account for instance, the unending ex-post commiseration, in the month since Greene's death, with the moral dilemma he had lived with. Is not much of this compounding a huge hypocrisy? It is safe, safe beyond measure; Greene is dead and gone, he is incapable of causing any further social embarrassment, the incongruities and contradictions in human behaviour will no longer be tauntingly commented upon. The cynic and the believer, after all, chose to co-colonize Graham Greene's soul: a man is born to sin, there are, he seemed always to be saying, no ways of escape, the social factor, such as fealty to wife, husband, mistress, paramour, child, friend, comrade, is betrayal. The deception one is fated to commit is nonetheless a self-contained exorcism; it is betrayal, therefore it is perdition. It is, simultaneously, atonement as well, death is life, life is death.

Greene wore no blinkers, he perceived social repression for what it was and is, a casualty of causality. The sardonic eye ever remained the sardonic eye, whether while detailing the genuflections of our man in Havana, or travelling with the formidable aunt, or befriending the ambivalent central American generals. He freely mixed facts with fiction, for he had in the

meantime caught on to the essence of the matter, are not long winding facts stranger than fiction, for example, imperialism is dead, long live imperialism, colonialism is defunct, colonialism is what provides the clue to the principle goings on it the dark nooks and recesses of the world. The United Nations Economic and Social Council, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, agencies and affiliates of the World Bank acclimate themselves into spending pots and pots of money to commission global economic assistance models; the ostensive purpose is to provide succour to so-called Third World countries. They could have saved themselves the bother. For years on end, despite the elegant models and the equally elegant speeches backing them up at international forums, the Third World has in the not been exporting capital to the rich Western countries. Whether you choose to ignore the particular context or not, it is once more a vindication of Greene: the more you concern yourself with the agony of atonement—or pretend to do so—the greater is the accumulation of sin, the atonement itself assumes the form of sin. Back and forth, back and forth, it is the same old frightening tale, from *Brighton Rock* onwards, but you hardly dare to call it that. The deadly allure of the confessional box, and yet, the irrelevance of it. Father, I have sinned. But the Father himself has sinned, he is a co-sinner, a co-victim, or, have it your way, a co-conspirator. So who will grant absolution to whom? Each one is a burnt-out case, including the doctor dispensing treatment and assurance. Faithfulness is the most fragile of human relationships, loyalty is deceit, trust is treachery, and yet as that other convert to Roman Catholicism loved to put it, in our beginning is our end, each time we return to faith, knowing fully well that, between faith and the absence of it, the chasm simply does not exist, the loser takes all, because, definitions be damned, the loser is the victor. Nothing is more vacuous than drawing a line between triumph and defeat; there can be, after all, no avoidance of the final fate, one seeks escape

in order to ensure entrapment; that is, once more, the social factor at work.

In spite of the doggedness of faith, it is therefore the eternal hour of the cynic. The determinism in canonical prescriptions is a dead-end; they are by no stretch even brave statements of nihilism, they are much too enervated for that. The other determinism, which socialist doctrines glorify and deify, has a similar message to transmit; such doctrines too both attract and repel. That at least was Greene's judgement. The dialectical analysis of the historical reality in Marxism, Greene would grant, is impeccable, the pain and suffering inflicted on people is, invariably, the handiwork of other people, or institutions manned by people. Sometimes the *deus ex machina* of oppression is the church itself, as in Haiti. Cross over the Nicaragua though, the church dons the mantle of the liberator, the sin shades off into atonement. So why desert a dilemma one knows so well for the dogma of a parallel moral principle, which states explicitly that man the individual can be liberated only by the creativity of man the collective? It may be logically highly satisfying, shuffling affiliations is still a bit like shuffling heresies. Besides, what is a heresy? Between affiliation and heresy the shadow does not fall; in a given context, religion itself, contradicting as it does the tenets of one, is heresy, or, turn the premise round, heresy itself is religion. The moral fabric is amoral, for the amorality liberates lost souls. That claim, it will be immediately said, is an unpardonable exaggeration. Could there actually be any liberation for lost souls, would they not contaminate the hitherto innocent ones, rendering them into apparitions without the least hope of redemption? Greene, will you not please agree, shades off into Dostoyevsky?

The sublime is banal, and the ludicrous treads the same path as the holiest of the holy. It is no tongue-in-cheek beseeching of coincidence; Graham Greene's epistemology of non-redemption and Mrinalini Sarabhai's lament over what the Reserve Bank has

done to our world of books have common co-ordinates. An individual, as much as a nation is accountable for its decisions and non-decisions; dare to defy the causal connection between deeds and their consequences, you will get even more messily entangled in the moral net. The social set Mrinalini Sarabhai belongs to had for long years bayed and bayed for liberalization. The government they owned, the government which belonged to them, could not be more ingratiating, it granted them all their demands. The result is the current mess, culminating in the desperate hurry to clamp restrictions on the availment of the Open General Licence. Mrinalini Sarabhai felt impelled to write to the newspapers, she should, however, have really addressed herself to her clansmen, the bourgeoisie in Bombay and Ahmedabad. Some of the latter breed continue to talk tough, or at least feign to do so, they are not willing to give up, they pin their faith on the International Monetary Fund. Father, we have not sinned, it is always the others to blame, the counter-point of the social factor does not worry them yet. That too is, however, fate, which is in fact historicity. Revolutions, it is assumed by the entrenched ones, always happen in the neighbour's territory, their own domain is bound to escape the contamination, and for reasons either aforesaid or following. The revolution, when it comes, will catch the dogma-mongers napping and bring much unhappiness, who knows, perhaps not just to the poor. There is not knowing how much hurt would be caused by whom and to whom in the final rounds. Those determined to play pranks with history cannot however be easily dissuaded. That is fate. That is however also dialectical materialism. Greene was aware that he had no satisfactory answer to the query why he shied away from communism. It was conceivably lethargy of a sort, but there was also that overhang of fidelity to one's beliefs, which defies logic. Alternatively, could it be that ultimate fatalism has taken over: since, between perdition and absolution, there is so little to choose, why cross over? Greene did not repudiate communism,

he merely decided to be where he was. It was not choice, but non-decision. That ambivalence was his philosophy. Mrinalini Sarabhai should rather re-read the old Graham Greenes than write to the newspapers.

MAY, 1991

## POOR MAN'S DOSTOEVSKY

Simenon is dead. Apart from *Memoires Intimes*, he had in fact produced little in the past decade. The *Memoires* is embarrassing, and not particularly because of the intimacies it reveals. It is Simenon's loss of control over style, his collapse into verbosity, to which the volume bears witness which is more tragic. Obviously, death had already started casting its shadow. Now it is over, there is no further Maigrets or non-Maigrets to be added to the two hundred fifty and odd taut works of fiction.

Simenon's passing has hardly bothered either the newspapers or the conventional literary circles. According to one view, he is the most underrated author to straddle the twentieth century. The assertion may be right, but it cannot diminish the other straightforward reality: he was not loved. A certain distant awe on the part of his readership, but no feeling of adoration, none at all. The almost supernatural power of his writing was acknowledged, but did not generate any ardour. Not quite a pariah, he was still an outcast. One simply had to read him, for he was habit-forming, but did he not repel too? Camus' *L'Etranger* started out as the archetypal anti-hero, he is now canonized. Simenon created characters whose existential predicament and inability to escape from perdition are no less excruciating. They, however, fail to evoke any sympathy. They only induce a mild discomfort, period. A parallel exists here with his own personal fate. He was lost to Belgium, the country where he was born: France, which made him, could not care less

for him; Switzerland, where he spent the past twenty-five years, was a mere tax haven. His characters walk alone, tucking within themselves the darkness of their spirit. For Simenon too, it has been a lonely trajectory. He had few friends. Even though he might have slept as he claimed, with ten thousand women, there were really few who, towards the end, could offer him some requited passion, if it was passion he was looking for. He was, till his death, altogether unloveable. Despite his death, the verdict remains the same. And yet, with what gall does one dare to repudiate the genius of this writer, or pretend to make light of the splendour of his prose and of the ferocity with which he dissected the tissues and arteries of the human soul? Many will of course continue to scoff at the genre he preferred.

Simenon learnt early to count money in the countinghouse. That was not the reason though why he opted for the oeuvre of crime and detection. It was not just that he was amoral, it was for him a matter of the deepest non-faith. He got nihilist pleasure in spurning the accolade of society's ma'rms, including the ghastly ones who preside over stylized salons.

Here was, Gide was convinced, another Dostoevsky in the making; all that was necessary was a modulation in pace. Simenon would not be trapped; he persisted in his waywardness. The concerned Nobel committee would have been horrified were the suggestion ever to travel up to them to consider him for the literature award. Once more Simenon could not have cared less.

His novels usually reach their climactic within a space of thirty to forty thousand words. Conventional notions die hard, or refuse to die; great poetry can be created within the confines of such limited space, but not, it is alleged, great fiction. So Gide notwithstanding, the issue is still an open-ended one: can one reach Dostoevskian heights and yet reject the Dostoevskian format? The towering Russians including Tolstoy, used to take a decade to produce a novel; valleys and mountains of emotions

undulate slowly, lugubriously; there are careful, crafted arrangements and re-arrangements of plots; unending confrontations of characters; adaptations, settings, transformations; preludes, overtures, intermezzos, finales; and intricate, methodically woven texture declared to be perfect only after all the rituals of classicism have been observed to the full. The times are different, the man is different; Simenon chooses otherwise, he is for the miniature. It is a challenge, the anatomy of the human soul must be encapsulated in a hundred liberally spaced pages. He therefore strips his prose for action. Genius is what genius does, he has a way of unfolding an ambience with a bare couple of sentences.

Quite transparently, he is in a hurry. To try to establish a nexus between this and his instinct for money-making will be sheer illiteracy. This man is in a desperate rush, he is trying it out over and over again, he wants to grasp the nettle of what to him is the basic *quaesitum*. The evil grafted in the human soul fascinates him. What are its ingredients, do these vary from individual to individual, or from situation to situation? Besides is evil at all distinguishable from what passes as good and civilized? Crime is the violence one individual or a group of individuals perpetrates against another individual or another group of individuals; it is a kind of consummation of the impulse to conquer and subjugate. But is this not what love too is about? Should we not be impressed by the coincidence, by this overlap between love and evil, as religious preachers define it, or crime as the police code defines it? Each time, Simenon is dissatisfied with the whispers and responses he comes up with. He cannot make up his mind whether evil is commonplace, and therefore less interesting, or whether it does indeed embody greatness. He is unable to commit himself either way; there is not enough dialectical evidence on the basis of which to clinch a judgement. So he keeps digging. Again and again and again, he returns to his *quaesitum*, the characters change their descriptions and their

milieu, but in effect nothing is changed, the probings remain what they always have been: what is love, what is hate, what is passion, what is carnality, what lies at the root of the urge to destroy another human soul, or - which is essentially the same thing - to destroy another human body? Since the knowledge is still imperfect, the final verdict must wait. An interlocutory message, however, filters through: interpersonal relations are merely a veil; underlying the so-called social reality is another more crucial, species of reality, a condemned human being is not necessarily devil incarnate, for the concept of evil itself is beyond the pale of understanding. Simenon gropes and gropes, providing the rationale for the one hundred twenty-fifth Maigret to be followed by the one-hundred twenty-sixth, and the one-hundred thirty-ninth non-Maigret by the one hundred fortieth, and *passim*.

Would one be permitted to pass a further comment? Simenon and Sartre were exact contemporaries. Perhaps Sartre detested Maigret, and the compliment was perhaps never returned. Perhaps they did not ever meet; at least no documentary evidence suggests that they did. But such non-accidents are an irrelevance; whether or not he liked Sartre, Simenon was unable to escape from an existential fate.

Feminists, as well as conventional defenders of human rights and of human dignity, have much *prima facie* reason to condemn Simenon from the depth of their heart, because of the manner in which he treated his women, not so much in his works of fiction, but in real life. Civilization as we define it will refuse to tolerate his attitude. He behaved abominably with his mother, a frail, timid, honest, little, indigent widow, who did her utmost to give her son a decent start in life. The nonchalance with which he cheated his first wife, and his utter lack of any sense of guilt for it, would sicken even many of his quasi-sympathisers. And perhaps one receives one's just deserts right here, without the formality of wasting time. His second wife was a shrew and

worse, and provided Simenon with a taste of a season in hell. For years on end, he sought to escape, and could not. He got his deliverance after a long hassle, but on financially disastrous terms. It was still not the end of the story, the other sex had an even more devastating revenge in store for him. His father-fixated daughter wanted to have him all for herself, she would not flinch from effecting a physical conquest even; a horrified Simenon ran for cover; the daughter ultimately took her life. This shattered Simenon. His confidence evaporated, his style lay in ruins, but there had to be *mémoires intimes*.

Read the book once more, it is really a confession box, a once and former granite of a personality, now crushed into smithereens, rambles inanities and exhibits a self pity which, alas, provokes scorn and zero compassion.

If only the liberationists would suspend their anger for a moment, there might be an alternative hypothesis. Could it be that Simenon's interminable sleepings-about were a manifestation of the same restlessness which drove him to produce, at the end of every three months, yet another novel on the indescribability of the agony colonizing the human soul? He passed from one woman to the next, but this was perhaps no run-of-the-mill seeker after carnal knowledge, he was merely trying to the subterranean mystique of man-woman relationship. No question a failed seeker, does that by itself render him a villain?

The questions keep churning upon themselves. Is it evil for a man to seek the knowledge of a woman, or for a woman to seek the knowledge of a man? Is it evil to break down barriers of resistance fellow beings build against one another? How does one define crime, what do confessions amount to when what one confesses to is a superficiality, an act which somehow saves the outward dignity of the social mores, such mores, however, have ceased to be relevant for an individual who has already crossed the rubicon and belongs to the other side, and how can

it be proved that the other side is irretrievable darkness when one's existential wanderings have failed to come up with any absolute criteria for defining good and evil?

Maybe there was another kind of inner yearning, maybe he, every now and then, badly wanted to come in and join the domestic scene. How does one otherwise explain the fidelity of his portrayal of Madame Maigret? She is calm, placid, oozing with the sweetness of life, mothering Maigret as he returns, afternoons and evenings, battered within himself, befuddled by his confrontation with newer evidences of the precariousness afflicting the human soul. Who knows perhaps Simenon himself was drawn to domesticity reigning the dull, cramped Boulevard Richard Lenoir apartment presided over by Madame Maigret. But he did not belong.

The mystery is unresolved. Was he himself evil, or was he only interested in evil, in taking it apart, finding out what makes it tick? The other problem too remains. Was he a hack writer of pulp who just happened to strike it rich, or was he one of the greatest of literary giants to walk the century now whimperingly coming to an end?

SEPTEMBER, 1989

## THAT APARTMENT IN CHURCHILL CHAMBERS

Is it officiousness to write, from distant Calcutta, on what is apparently the most trivial detail of a minor event in Bombay? Following a certain legal transaction, a second-floor apartment in Churchill Chambers, a dilapidated run-down building on Merewether Road, just behind the Taj, has passed out of the orbit of circles proximate to the Sameeksha Trust and *The Economic and Political Weekly*. The outside world could not care less. Those who pay their good money to subscribe to this journal may raise their eyebrows at the seeming waste of space. They will be right. And yet, they will be wrong.

That Churchill Chambers apartment was the abode, from the day the *Economic Weekly* was born and even earlier, of Sachin Chaudhuri, founder-editor of that journal as well as of its successor and standard-bearer, the *EPW*. The apartment was an open house. Guests trooped in, they trooped out. Some guests stayed for months on end. They came in all shades and shapes and from all continents, from V.S. Naipaul to Joan Robinson, from an academic on the run from East Pakistan under military rule to a comprehensively mad Kathakali dancer from Santiniketan. Often there would be a couple of guests who were antipodal in their scholarly views, they hated each other's guts, did not speak to each other, but had to share, for weeks together, the dingy, dark inside room in the apartment. Anti-Krishna Menon activists had to reconcile themselves to the company of starry-eyed fans of

Menon, with their India League blazer not yet quite faded. Ram Manohar Lohia would storm in, spouting anti-Nehru venom, hell hath no fury than that of one spurned by Indira Gandhi. He too, however, will receive his comeuppance, for the visitor overlapping with him would perhaps be Purushottam Das Tandon the junior. Every now and then, Devika Rani would drop in, or that once ravishing-Elphinstone College - LSE beauty, Sharada Mukherjee, *nee* Pandit. Occasionally, there would be complete mis-matches, such as between A.K. Dasgupta the economist and a now long-forgotten film star like Abhi Bhattacharya. An indolent Sunday morning, a lissome Fourth International activist would discover herself sharing a narrow love-seat with a foul-mouthed Stalinist. Central Planner, including one or two academicians from the Soviet Union, would be guests at dinner, and exchange banter and rudeness with free market-lovers from God's own country. An Oskar Lange or a Michal Kalecki would come to discuss serious economics, and would spend a flirtatious bewitching evening in the company of Leilamani Naidu, the formidable Sarojini's younger daughter. Slovenly artists, a down-and-out poet, a soccer player who was Sachin Chaudhuri's chum in his Dhaka days and currently a celebrated cadger of free drinks and free meals, more the former than the latter, a covey of aspiring journalists, a Sanskrit scholar from a Banaras *chatuspathi*, a *patri sarkar* veteran from Satara, or an outspoken Daniel Thorner absolutely unwilling to suffer any fools, to be duly calmed down by Alice Thorner, the great tactician. In one corner of what could pass for the ante-room, a frail looking Ph.D student in anthropology, a bundle of nerves all over, would perhaps sit and watch the procession of the famous and the infamous pass by. Had he or she belonged to the discipline of economics, that would be a practical lesson in 'potential indivisibility' in Allyn Young's words. An awesome lot could be learned from the ambience of Churchill Chambers. Ego would clash with ego, sparks would fly.

there would be much consumption, if there were mornings, of raw tea, and if after sundown, of either native rum or Scotch whisky. The devout Gandhian, who had called on Sachin Chaudhuri because he was bowled over by one of *The Economic Weekly* editorials, would suffer in silence; he would spend the rest of the week wondering whether Euclid was not wrong, whether parallel lines do not indeed meet. A bright young economics lecturer from a mofussil college, or a junior officer in the Planning Commission, while on a visit of Bombay, Churchill Chambers; he had sent a clumsy, rather confused manuscript to *The Economic Weekly*, the editor, however, took immense pains to transform it into something reasonably presentable; it must have involved solid eight to ten hours of hard work on his part; but perhaps he had discovered buried in the third paragraph of page nineteen of that manuscript a modest little point which made sense. The young man did not dare to use the lift; he had taken the stairs, walked all the way up and pressed the doorbell. The reception he received overwhelmed him; he would immediately come to the feeling that it was taken as axiomatic that he belonged. And talking of the lift, there was an occasion when Sachin Chaudhuri and Devika Rani were stuck in that ramshackled contraption, which suddenly stopped working, for a full twenty-five minutes; only the two of them in the lift, and the wretched editor, who, during one of his several incarnations, had been general manager, no less, of Bombay Talkies, no less, did not still address one word of either endearment or assurance to the lady who was the established number one film personality in the country; he kept jabbering away on some obscure footnote in Gunnar Myrdal's *The American Dilemma*.

Of course the Myrdals, Gunnar and Alva, had come several times, for a meal at Churchill Chambers. So too came, a decade later, the prodigal son, Jan. In the olden days, a frequent visitor would be the scholar extraordinary from Lucknow, D.P. Mukherji, the one who wrote the editorial for *The Economic*

*Weekly*'s inaugural issue in 1949, 'Light without Heat'. That apartment in Churchill Chambers would of course radiate light, and not just from the ends of umpteen burnt-away cigarettes. Even so, heat did not actually play truant. It could not. For, for example, a then-still young shipping tycoon, a devout free market-wallah, was a frequent dropper-in, but so was his wife who happened to be the daughter of Keshav Dev Malaviya, the union-minister, at the time vastly enjoying himself in the act of cocking a snook at the Americans and the World Bank and appropriating for the State the burgeoning oil sector. To make the non-circle complete, the other dinner guests would presumably be a top officials from the World Bank - and the Zinkins, the husband formerly with the Indian Civil Service and at the moment with a multinational company, and the wife, a tiny tough émigré from Central Europe, the India correspondent of *The Guardian*. Or imagine the situation when a Shanti Sadiq Ali, divided between her concerns for Africa and for her husband's political future, a genuine hater of communists, and more so, of crypto-communists, would be pouring her heart out to Sachin Chaudhuri, the telephone would suddenly ring, and who it would be at the other end except Aruna Asaf Ali. At the Churchill Chambers' apartment, none would be allowed to get away by pronouncing an obiter dictum, or what looked like one; better would be joined, and no quarters would be given by x to y, or by y to x, roars of laughter would follow roars of indignation. The only exception would be when P.C. Mahalanobis would come to dinner: when the Professor talked, it was a monologue, even if twenty other persons were crowding the sitting room. No interruption or intervention is permissible when the oracle speaks; even Sachin Chaudhuri would be on his best behaviour; only when a subtle, sophisticated point had been made, and appreciated in full, the Professor would glare, with a twitch of a smile on his face, and the editor would break into what was a cross between a cackle

and a guffaw. That guffaw would carry itself all the way towards the general direction of the Gateway of India.

There would be other occasions of merry-making as well. For example, when Lal Bahadur Shastri, at the suggestion of Atulya Ghosh, made Sachin Chaudhuri, the Calcutta barrister, the finance minister of the country, the congratulatory telegrams and telephones were overwhelmingly directed at the Churchill Chambers' address. There would be jubilation when the managerial C. Rajagopalachariar would drop a note praising an outspoken editorial comment on the state of civil liberties in the country.

In that apartment, apart from house guests whose heterogeneity of background and length of stay were both equally indeterminate, there were books, heaps of them, strewn all over, books on literature, history, mathematics and science, astronomy, economics, sociology, philology, philosophy, psychology, Sanskrit and Pali classics, biographies of holy men and of vamps like Mae West. Also books on art and sculpture, not just of the coffee table variety. Food would be aplenty, although the hours of meals would be somewhat chaotic, and the quality of the fare would vary from day to day. *The Economic Weekly* was habituated to lead a dicey existence, and the founder-editor's cash balances were altogether unpredictable. It used to happen on countless number of days that, at one corner of the living room, someone, passing through the town and innocently dropping in on Churchill Chambers, had been blackmailed into writing the main editorial for the week's issue of the journal and was desperately trying to put into shape a few coherent paragraphs; at another corner, the editor was trying to coax some short-term accommodation from a second visitor, so that the one writing the editorial could be taken out to a sumptuous luncheon.

It was, to wit, a combination of salon and hostelry and tavern and academia. *The Economic Weekly* was unique in one

particular respect: it tried to combine serious scholarly work with humdrum journalism, to bring econometrics, political lampooning, village studies and international relations together; there were issues of the Weekly which contained even cartoons and nonsense rhymes. The Churchill Chambers' apartment was equally unique. It was a madhouse, but there was an organized method in the madness. No visitor went without a meal or without a bed. And let us skip the theme of intellectual stimulation; pomposity did not go with what came to be known as the Churchill Chamber's milieu.

Sachin Chaudhuri, to be candid, did not manage the apartment, it ran on its own inertia. One of his brothers, Hiten, would do some quiet ministrations. The two nephews who stayed with him, Arup and Swarup – Khokan and Chhottu to near and dear ones – reached their adulthood in this apartment. They sheltered the uncle from committing too many indiscretions. They took care of the overbearing-ness of some of the more trying guests. They contributed to that air of domesticity which made the apartment more than a caravan-serai. That apartment was, deservedly, the talk of the town in Bombay. It was the talk of the town in Nehruvian India as well.

India is not a nation; it was, even to begin with, a compromise. Now that compromise is frayed at the ends, and just about anything can happen to it. However, at least while that compromise was taken seriously, the emphasis was on accommodating one another's point of view. That uncivilized breed, the management experts, has misappropriated what was once a very civilized expression, interface, and rendered it vulgar. India during those intermediate decades of the century was an exercise in the endeavour to evolve a sophisticated interface between conflicting views and ideologies. *The Economic Weekly* was a spin-off of that exercise. So too was that apartment in Churchill Chambers.

Sachin Chaudhuri has been dead for more than twenty-five years, but the apartment, on which the brother Arup and Swarup had a leasehold, was still open house for the Sameeksha Trust and the *EPW* family, choc-a-bloc with memories of Sachin Chaudhuri in all its rooms. Now, within a spell of a brief four months, the brothers too are both gone, and that apartment in Churchill Chambers has reverted to its legal owners. The apartment encapsulated within its walls the history of a meaningful chapter of post-independence India. Perhaps there is a bit of poetic justice there. As India formally ceases to be independent, or ceases to be an integer, it is as well that that apartment too is detached from its antecedents.

AUGUST, 1992

## IMMORTALITY OF A KIND

Milestones are no longer worth a mention. In the last week of October, Jyoti Basu created history of some sort. B.C. Roy was chief minister of West Bengal from the first week of March 1948 till his death on the first day of July 1962, which happened to be his birthday too. That was an uninterrupted run of fourteen years and four months. Jyoti Basu has now outstripped B.C. Roy as the longest-serving chief minister, the record holds for any state in the country. At the national level, Jawaharlal Nehru's continuous tenure as prime minister stretched to three months short of seventeen years. Other things remaining equal, Jyoti Basu's durability promises to cast into shade even that Nehruvian achievement.

The event nonetheless has passed unnoticed, milestones are now passé. Theoreticians given to quoting from ideological manuscripts will in any case frown upon subjectivity. Jyoti Basu's parliamentary success, they will argue, should be accredited to the grit, or whatever it be, attaching to the party he belongs to. The achievement, a few others will maintain, is no more remarkable than the tedious longevity of the Congress Party at the helm of affairs at the centre since Independence. Take a look at foreign countries. Mexico's leading political party has been in power continuously for eighty years. Japan's Liberal Democrat Party promises to make an equally impressive showing. Stratagems and techniques have been mastered whereby while

individuals come and go, because of the law of attrition, the dominance of the parties they happen to represent remains unimpaired. What the Left Front has proved in West Bengal is the point that to the successful – permanently successful – within the framework of bourgeois democracy is not an impossible art for a formation which is generally known as a communist party, particularly where competition is poor and no great causes wait in the wings, inertia largely determines the course of history.

Jyoti Basu, according to this version, has merely been around; the party of which he is one of the leaders remains in control of the administration in West Bengal because the once-assumed-to-be-feasible alternatives have exhausted themselves. The Congress Party in the state is both moribund and corrupt. The fundamentalists do not prosper in the state's arcane climate. Radicals on the extreme left have dates, partly because of their own follies; the haziness in their ideology has spelled degeneracy. Nature abhors vacuum; the Communist Party of India (Marxist) availed of the opportunity provided by this most ordinary law of nature. Whether in the near fifteen years it has been in complete control of the state administration it has sinned more than it has been sinned against continues to be a popular theme of debate in the neighbourhood. The Bengalis are currently much on the decline as a cultural conglomerate. This too is a part of historicity. The Left Front has got the blame for the ongoing phenomenon. The Front, and its principal constituent, the CPI(M), have no doubt failed to resist the tide of vulgarisation that has overtaken the state. Basically, is that not what national integration is all about? The nation has been vulgarised, why should West Bengal be left behind?

The CPI(M), besides, has enjoyed one particular benefit bequeathed by the never-say-die feudal ethos. The habit of switching and re-switching loyalties on nominal pretexts goes ill with the feudal spirit. The masses, and those bossing over them, learnt to stay still through India's five thousand years of

querulous civilization. Even a communist party supposedly pledged to revolution, cannot escape from being gifted the fruits of this poison tree of tradition. All that was called for was implementation of a modest programme of minimal reforms in the rural areas; be in peace, the country's Constitution will not permit any maximal thrusts. An unspectacular shift in budgetary allocations, tilting the scales just a wee bit in favour of the countryside will do the trick. Combine this with periodic elections to the rural bodies, based on universal adult franchise and success becomes inescapable. The Left Front did not have to bother to change the statute which was passed way back in 1961 by the old order, to overhaul the panchayati set-up in the state. The Congress Party shied away from enforcing that piece of legislation which had proposed the introduction of adult suffrage. The Front, without fussing at all over its impeccability, used that law to organize elections to the rural administrative agencies. That decision changed West Bengal's political complexion, seemingly for perpetuity. The sustained pressure from the Kisan Sabha and application of some run-of-the-mill common sense are now additional insurance against failure in free democratic elections. Rural loyalty endures. West Bengal is four-fifths rural in terms of the delimitation of electoral constituencies. That is all that needs to be stated, it will be said, by way of explanation of Jyoti Basu's systematic smashing of records within the ambit of India's ramshackle parliamentary democracy. The irony is that a party, communist by nomenclature, walks away with the prizes the western model of democracy is reputedly capable of offering, and this precisely during moments when the Soviet Union and the rest of east Europe chose to decree their own withering away. If Jyoti Basu's success is dubbed as a miracle, miracles obviously are no longer what they used to be.

The environment still has a supplementary story to tell. India, despite the five thousand years of civilization – or, come

to think of it, very much on account of these thousands of years – is a comprehensive cesspool. History churns and churns, but does not quite advance. Once sessions presided over by the locally bred toughs had their surcease, empire-builders were imported from outside. They filled in, faithfully, the classical roles prescribed for them. They too departed when the time was up. The surrogates who took over – once more the local breed – were most keen to persist with the imported imperial model. They did a cut and paste job of writing a constitution which in essence is a schemata of a tight unitary state; legislative, financial, monetary and administrative powers are to be tightly held by a dominant, determined centre. A party, should it choose to walk the prime parliamentary path despite its formal adherence to the pledge of a popular democratic revolution, could thus hardly nurture any illusion. It had to accept the rigid boundary conditions set by the Constitution. A few malicious ones will let drop the comment that the party in question, the CPI(M), is yet to outgrow its phase of neo-literacy, and Jyoti Basu has bulldozed it into the belief that revolution is an impossibility. The working of a tightly disciplined party is much more complicated than what such formulations would suggest. In any event, irrespective of whether the options were foreclosed on mature thought or arbitrarily assumed away, the Left Front finds itself deeply, and inexorably, involved in the labyrinth of state administration. It is a most civil, constitution-abiding administration, for the Constitution is not to be flouted and care has to be taken that in the game of democratic politics, one does not lose out to one's adversaries.

What are, or could have been, the other choices? The past quarter of a century has been a great one for dispelling inchoate consciousness. It is not any longer easy to shake off the global context. The wild romanticism of general secretary Aaidit, the glory of Vietnam, that once-upon-a-time exciting theory of encircling the town by the country, reconsider each experience

in today's harsh light, the chasm between the sincerest of sacrifices and sloppy slogan-mongering narrows down and finally disappears. One is therefore forced to be cautious. One improvises, and learns to compromise. Therein lies the danger; the compromise itself at some point might threaten to supplant ideology. East Europe and the shenanigans in the erstwhile Soviet Union did not cast much of a shadow on the ideological landscape around here. Despite naïve shrieks in the capitalist press, delegations of foreign communist parties were received with much cheer in Calcutta's thoroughfares, but so what, even the South Africans have been accorded an equally warm reception. Events unfolding in the former bastions of socialism nonetheless are giving rise to pragmatic thoughts. The theory of encirclement, (it is now regarded self-evident,) works only in a post-revolutionary situation; it is absurd to try to apply its principles in just one corner of a country still essentially semi-feudal and also part capitalist, the mighty paraphernalia of oppression at the disposal of the federal government will crush the advance guards of the revolution in no time. With the international climate also being hostile in the extreme, the revolutionary course is out, it is important to be on one's best behaviour. The routine has been simplified: use the solid base the movement has succeeded in developing in one or two parts of the country to capture, through democratic elections, the state administrations. However, penetration into the state administration provides little benefit especially for the rural poor, all the while ensuring that the boundary conditions of the Constitution are not transgressed. The funds, whatever is left over after taking care of the rural masses, must be utilized to accord some relief to the non-rural masses as well. This is necessary, since these categories have been loyal to the movement. The hallmarks of a Left administration should therefore be: openness, compassion for the poor, efficiency in work and endeavours, and looking after one's class friends. The messages would then

spread: how, despite the wretched perversities or the Constitution which offers the states comprising the Union of India only an illusion of power and resources, an honest, Left-leaning state administration could still usher in significant increases in social and economic welfare for the masses. Not that the world has any time to spare for West Bengal, but the rest of the country would have. The dream of revolution is blurred at this point. So for the present, accept this version of a two-legged theory: provide an example of sincerity and integrity by the manner you conduct the affairs of a state, supplement this by mounting a relentless campaign for the realignment of centre-states relations; let the literati and the masses both realize that the failure to ensure miracles on earth is as much because of the absurdity of the Constitution as on account of the late unraveling of class factors.

The reasonable-sounding theorem clicked for the first few years. The poor in the countryside were made happy with some minimum benefits duly arranged for them; adult suffrage worked like magic; no danger now lurks of the apple-cart being upset by sudden preternatural forces unleashed by the phenomenon of the bourgeois vote. The problem lies elsewhere. In terms of the arithmetic of electoral politics, the urban populace does not much matter. They are, however, both vocal and visible, their sense of discontent is immediately reflected in the capitalist press, by now the capitalist press has also learnt the craft of manufacturing disgruntlements on its own. It will also be a folly to forget in this context the fact that the movement was originally sustained mostly by the urban middle classes. A few gestures had therefore to be made towards their direction. This has got known as pampering of the lazy, worthless aristocracy of labour. Assertive trade unionism is, however, only party responsible for West Bengal's comprehensive de-industrialization. Machiavellian, and generally extremely short-sighted, policies pursued by the centre have played a much more

decisive role in that murky history. But once you are in charge of a state's administration, mere harping on about ancient and recent history will not do. The re-alignment of centre-states relations, like the revolution, may become a reality in a hazy tomorrow, till that particular dawn arrives, what do you propose to tell the unemployed urban youth, who have been of late mostly nurtured by the morality of Bachchan films? The state is in desperate need of more investments, either directly from the coffers of the union government, the financial institutions controlled by it, or from the nationalized banks, and New Delhi must be compelled to ensure that more industrial licences come the state's way.

The union government could hardly bother. It had, and has, other priorities. It has also meanwhile stumbled on a rather congenial truth; the lessons of Lenin and Stalin have one tremendous merit, no communist party will venture into any monkey tricks which threaten to destabilize the national polity, a communist party is for the present therefore much less dangerous than the insurgents on the rampage in Punjab, Kashmir or Assam. The communists and their occasional genuflections, in other words, need not be taken very seriously.

Too bad this truth soon gets to be widely known. The state administration nominally run by a communist party thereby finds itself played into an impossible corner. The milieu is of competitive democratic polities. It will not do to alienate groups and sections that are 'sensitive' from the electoral point of view; you cannot be harsh with anybody, you have to humour everybody. Social discipline withers away, while funds remain woefully short. The political compulsion to earmark resources for the countryside is absolute, but what about others? The centre will not allocate any extra resources for you, and this despite the fact that the confrontation over centre-states relations has been adjourned for the past few years. Perhaps the centre has neither the time nor the resources for you precisely because the

confrontation was ended and you are now regarded as no more than a paper tiger.

The slightly worried Left Front regime in the state therefore looks around for other lifebuoys. The urban youth is getting increasingly restless, the state cannot be allowed to turn into a desert. If the centre will not play ball, the policy of the principle is still the best policy, the decision is taken to engage the private industrialists in conversation. There specimens too are no better than paper tigers; about nine-tenths of the funds they invest in any industrial venture, for which they hog both the credit and the profit, either come from the public financial institutions or are arranged by the latter. The information has apparently by-passed the Left Front. Or it could be that the hour is already too late, and the habit one slides into takes precedence over circumspection. Lazy civil servants are in any event greatly enamoured of the concept of the joint sector; the fate of the units concerned could be left to the charge of private adventurers while the minor perks these offer come the civil servants' way. The West Bengal case is however much further gone. The principal item on the agenda is wholesale re-industrialization in the state, supposed to be spearheaded by an ambitious array of investment guzzling projects. Economic liberalization notwithstanding, the setting is of a grand illusion. The private johnnies know that the kind of money which West Bengal's industrial revival calls for is far beyond the limits of their capability. The political bosses in New Delhi continue to be the masters in all money matters.

The Left Front is in a jam. The slogans promising spectacular industrialization cannot be wiped off overnight. The urban discontent will not abate. The joint sector initiative therefore reduces itself to frivolities. The revolution is no longer round the corner; as you wait for it, you might as well entertain yourself by participating in some real estate capers.

Fifteen years in a bourgeois ambience leaves its mark: it is,

after all, a respectable Marxist tenet that it is environment which creates the man! The private sector, it should have been discovered by now, is as toothless as the state government itself. Perhaps the truth has been realized, but there is no harm, according to some quasi-authoritative formulations, in keeping it in good humour. The men from the private firms are incapable of building industries; let them build parks and trade centres. They cannot arrange finances for the proposed gaunt Haldia Petrochemical Complex; let them at least do the landscaping there, never mind if that too has to be on state government money.

Jyoti Basu has been around long enough to comprehend the realities that followed his decisions, and, it is important to add, his non-decisions. The catastrophe in east Europe and the Soviet Union makes his position somewhat more difficult. But it also vindicates him. It is not his fault if the circumstances conspire to invest him and his party with immortality, never mind the fate of the popular democratic revolution. And what business have those who have sold the country to foreigners, lock, stock and barrel, and without anyone's leave, to cast stones at the improvisations of West Bengal's Left Front?

DECEMBER, 1991

## WHEN A PART OF ONESELF SAYS ADIEU

Calcutta is somewhat of a backwater. The news happens a thousand kilometres away, in the nation's capital. Throughout April, the news from New Delhi has had a consistent murkiness: those who are in command of this polity have reached, or are about to reach, the very lowest depths, those who live by corruption are dying by it. The story breaks bit by bit, with a murky consistency, every day. From the backwaters of Calcutta, one reads and listens about the unfolding events. A cloud of listlessness descends. Was this the denouement the nation was waiting for, was this the face that launched a thousand ships ...?

Another tiding from the nation's capital has a different import. In the midst of the concealments and the alarms and the red herrings, a saga reaches its culmination in New Delhi. Raj Thapar who, for more than a year, was fighting the battle against spreading cancer, had, for day after day, endured without demur the intense physical suffering, has finally been made to yield. During the past months, by the manner she kept up the struggle, she testified to the near infinite limit of human courage; she mocked at the apparition of death, asked it not to be proud, made a non-entity of its sting. But now it was April, the cruel month, and things were falling apart in the nation's capital. As the stories broke, the grisly stories, in serried disarray, perhaps it was too much for her emaciated frame, she chose to fade away.

Does one mourn when a part of oneself says adieu? Memories are unshackled, and these are memories of shared cherishing and shared endeavour. It is forty years since Independence, a full four decades from the halcyon forties when thousands and thousands of young people, in Lahore and Bombay, Madras, Delhi, Nagpur, Calcutta and elsewhere, were poised on the threshold of history; history, they decided, logically and legitimately, was their creation. The rainbow of their dream, they convinced themselves, was about to land on earth; the millennium, they assured themselves, was a-coming; Indians were soon going to be a free people; henceforth, India would be the kingdom of the hitherto neglected and dispossessed, henceforth, India would be a perfect communion of the home and the world, cultures would comingle, opportunities would flow, evenly, towards all directions. Those young people walked on wings; the rainbow of their dream was within their grasp. Those young people were in no doubt of the destiny they were walking into; that destiny was putty clay in their hands for they made it.

Raj Thapar was one of those young people forty years ago who thought that, henceforth, the world would belong to them, because the India the imperialists were scampering away from belonged to them. Many of these young men and women came through the mail of the fledgling students' federation. Their eyes would light up at the sight of the red flag. It was their particular pride that they were integrated with the communist party, were flesh of its flesh; the revolution was round the corner, it was waiting for them, much in the manner of a lover waiting for his beloved. Faith, these young ones knew, could move mountains by their idealism and dedication, they were going to transform India, they would do so by their intense creativity. They branched out in several directions: some of them left for the countryside to organize the peasantry, some devoted themselves to trade union work in factories and plants, some others to the railways and docks and mercantile offices, a few drifted to

journalism, another lot to academic pursuits, yet others to the arts, including painting and music and theatre and films. It did not really matter which field they chose, they had a common focal point for each of them was a combatant, an activist; they had commitment to themselves, and a greater commitment to the movement, and the nation.

That was the age of innocence. The young ones took pride in being part of the people's brigade, the communist party was the beacon. None had heard of commission agents in that age; the obscenity of Bombay's Nariman Point would have been beyond the ken of their comprehension.

Already, a magnificent legend of collective heroism was in the making amongst the masses in Telengana; Kishen Chander and Manik Bandyopadhyay were writing some explosive stories about the wretched of the earth who would emerge as conquering heroes following the revolution; both intellect and talent were placed at the disposal of the party and the people; even the eccentric Harindranath Chattopadhyay had been contaminated, he was bent upon committing his own kind of mischief so as to serve the cause. The famine in Bengal had revealed several things together: the cynicism of imperialism, the avarice of your homebred exploiters, and yet, at the same time, the indomitable courage of men and women who dared to chart a new beginning beyond famine and deaths. The impending partition of the country would wound and hurt, but even if separated into two nations, the young people would have a common dream: a country exists for its people, not the other way round, so the struggle on either side of the partitioned land must continue to concentrate on liberating the masses from the shackles of feudalism and medievalism. The young people must be with the people, their creative urges must be fine-tuned to serve the people's cause, it did not matter if the rest be silence.

Four decades is a long span. In the course of these forty years, many of these youngsters stayed the whole stretch with the

communist party. Others have drifted away, some for specific reasons, some others victims of the attrition of the times. Very few-discarded political economy for commerce. Raj Thapar moved some distance, and yet, every time one met her, it was home-coming, a home-coming into the passion which a starry-eyed romantic youth, all dedication to the communist party, was trapped into in the distant forties. We were once in it together, her persona would seem to say, and, by the very fact, we remain in it together, whatever our current formal affiliation, or the lack of it. To be next to her was to return, each time, to the camaraderie of the commune, to the thrill of writing posters together, to the excitement of acting as a courier, to the grit needed to run an underground press, to the excruciating sweetness of giving and receiving and sharing. During these forty years, one has crossed many bridges of sighs, experienced many false beginnings and endured many humiliating half-endings. On every occasion one met Raj Thapar, however, it was again spring and sunshine. She had a way of dealing with disappointments: she would cheer herself up, and the company alongside too. In many circles, the genre of dreams one dreamt in the forties is not the staple of guffaws. Altogether undeterred, Raj Thapar would sail through such guffaws. She had not outlined the dream; while she might have grown out of some of its parts, she had also grown through them. Not for a moment therefore would she deviate from either consistency or composure. How dare anyone insinuate that what we cherished forty years ago was a sham and a fraud; we are the legatees of the passion; we are what we are on account of that passion. Due to the stress of time, and the pressure of externalities, our relative position might be somewhat at variance with what it was when we would hawk the party paper on the pavements of Bombay or Delhi or Calcutta ; does it matter however? Are not we basically what we were four decades ago, dreamers who are committed activists, combatants? Did we not imbibe from the movement

that our current relative placement is an irrelevance? This nation, despite its apparent infirmities, still belongs to us, it is for us, to mould it, to slap it into shape, to reach it where it must be reached, the safe custody of the people who, in the ultimate analysis, are the true progenitors of history, is it not history which we are pledged to create?

Thapar would trot from activity to activity, from project to scheme, a cheerfulness would radiate from her core, and infect you. She would dream, but she had a Punjabi eye for detail, her thoroughness would overwhelm you. A thoroughness delicately balanced with a rare thoughtfulness, to each person who would visit her she would be equally devastatingly considerate. Again, was it not that early training within the fold which showed up here, there would be no deviation from principles, but firmness would be intermeshed with charm, and charm would be the surrogate for firmness. The policy of the principle is supreme, but we owe it to the cause to convince the others and carry with us the largest possible measure of support, so gestures which do not compromise the principle are in order; control your irritation and impatience, it is a messy world, it is infested by people who are not like you and me, because we want to change this world, because we want to transform these people, we must learn how to be long-suffering, we must learn to keep still in order that we might learn to move fast.

Such was Raj Thapar, and now she gone. She kept her faith till the very end. She never gave up the fight, either for herself or India she loved, the India she loved to dream about, reciprocate, will she keep her faith? One honestly does not know, the atmosphere reeks not just of gunpowder, but of decay and betrayal too. Will Raj's India be able to cope with it, and proudly come through?

If Raj Thapar were around, she would, invariably cheer one up. But she is not around, one of the young people who, forty-odd years ago, aglow with hope and commitment, took a pledge

to capture the rainbow of a dream, has now faded away. In due course, her infinite charm would be rendered into a bare memory. There is a wrench in the heart which is beyond assuaging.

APRIL, 1987

## A PHASE ENDS

Elsewhere in the country, this name, Snehangshu Acharyya, would mean little or nothing. In Calcutta and Bengal, the man with that name was larger than life. Now that he is dead, a phase is ended. But ended for whom? Men and women, through their endeavours and indiscretions, are responsible for making history. Nonetheless, history, once it crystallizes, is so altogether impersonal. Besides, history moves away from what it creates. Perhaps, when the annals of the period are written, this name, Snehangshu Acharyya, will, in a stray paragraph, illuminate a stray point. Once the point is made, history will rush along, and oblivion will claim the man who in his milieu, was almost a legend, as much to those who went along with his ideology as those who most certainly did not.

Before he joined the communist movement, this man was Maharajkumar Snehangshu Kanta Acharyya Choudhury, scion of the Maharaja of Mymensingh. The Maharaja was by far the biggest landlord in this part of the yet undivided country, just as Mymensingh was the country's largest district. Acharyya was thus born to wealth and luxury and ostentation. Cornwall's Permanent Settlement had ensured a system of perpetual exploitation of the eastern peasantry; it also ensured that the extorted surplus would travel elsewhere. Part of it went into conspicuous consumption right in the countryside; the major fraction, however, floated across to the urban sector, but, again,

was used for pursuits of the leisure class-real estate, Daimlers and Rolls Royce. There was the occasional patronage of music and the arts, but mostly horse-racing, mistresses and concubines. Acharyya's father, the Maharaja, somewhat off the beaten track, was a man full of piety and of extraordinary generosity; however, it was not given to him to break out altogether of his milieu. Under the benign patronage of the British crown, the feudal gentry was having the grandest of times. There was no tomorrow in the horizon, the privileged - and the literati patronized by them - had inherited the earth. Concepts of social justice, whiffs of David Hume, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham notwithstanding, had little chance to ruffle this tranquillity. This status quo was also based on the secure fact that four-fifths of the population were at least three-quarters dead. Feudalism was, after all, backed by awesome British might, and who did not know that the sun never set over the empire. Feudalism formed natural alliances. Snehangshu Acharyya's grandfather on the mother's side was one of Calcutta's leading barristers, haughty, foppish, and immensely rich.

This was Acharyya's heritage. Born in the second decade of the century, he belonged to the cream of the over-privileged. Going by probability distribution, he ought to have grown up into a dissolute young man, squandering money, alternating between fast cars and faster women, and, sodden with drink and debauchery, ending prematurely. A sizeable number of his contemporaries from the feudal set chose this existence; they did not even know that they had any choice. Acharyya sprang a surprise. He decided, and chose. The offspring of Bengal's richest landlord walked away from his heritage. He joined the communist party. It was no ritualistic, casual declaration of allegiance. He surrendered everything to the party, his time, his talent, and his entire assets, including family jewels, balances in the banks and real estate in Calcutta, Darjeeling, assorted locations in what is now Bangladesh, and elsewhere. What

belonged to the people, he convinced himself, must return to the people. The party is the people. So whatever he had, the party came to inherit. From 1936 to 1986, it was a story of unflinching, undeviating loyalty. There could be no living outside party life: you have your doubts and questions, your hang-ups and susceptibilities, by all means give vent to them, but do so within the party norms, without harming the cause of the party. To hurt the party is to hurt the people, and have not your fore-fathers already done enough of that?

The conversion began early, right from his school days. From helping the terrorists in the underground to walking into the communist party was for Acharyya a short haul. A pity, so little has been written or mentioned about this twentieth century phenomenon, the Bengali renaissance, the only Bengali renaissance in fact, which, in due course, became the communist party. This was a fantastic development, as if different layers of the Bengali gentry were on a collective atonement binge. Forgive us, and accept us. Our fore-fathers had exploited the land, starved the peasantry, raped the tribal women; they took from the land and its people, never put back anything; they gave the nation Rammohun Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Chittaranjan Das and Jagadish Chandra Bose and thought they had done a great deal. They ensured the impoverishment of the land, they paved the way for successive famines and pestilences by abetting the British, they contributed to the massive de-industrialization of these shores, but they never felt responsible. This criminal lot had to be atoned for. Our talent and resources, whether acquired or cultivated must be surrendered as atonement. We can partly atone for the sins of our forefathers by placing at the disposal of the party and the movement this meagre package of talent and resources; so be it then, let us discard our ego, and integrate, with pride, into the collective awareness which is the party.

This humility and this pride built the communist party in the thirties, forties and the fifties into what in effect became

Bengal's only genuine renaissance. Snehangshu Acharyya was an ingredient of this renaissance; he was also a product of it. Once he had made up his mind fifty years ago, he never looked back. What a tremor it had caused then, in the early 1940s, when this fabulously rich Maharajkumar, frantically pursued by dowager mothers from impeccable gentile families for their eligible daughters, announced his conversion to the lower depths. This young man, a barrister-at-law, handsome, witty, elegant, a sportsman and athlete who excelled as much in cricket as in tennis or hockey, who commanded a bevy of luxury cars, who was the instant life of the party whenever he turned up, decided to chuck it all. The dowager mothers were scandalized, their dainty eligible daughters were disbelieving, their chaperoning elder brothers took it as a personal insult, but Acharyya walked out. From then on, it was a different kind of party for him, the communist party, the party which, to him, meant both atonement and fulfillment. Here was no romantic exile, he knew what he was forsaking, and what for. And when the party came to better days, that is, better days within the ambit of the feudal capitals hegemony nobody could allege that Acharyya had asked anything from it. You came to the communist party to give, not to receive. For Snehangshu Acharyya, there was no deviation from the rule in half a century's record.

Despite turning a communist, in one sense he remained a Prince Charming. He would keep open house, comrades and other would drift in, bringing their problems to him. Not one would be turned away. Generous to a fault, he would give you his time and, if needed, his money. His personal convictions notwithstanding, he would build bridges in all directions. He had a long memory; he would remember in precise detail who, thirty years ago, had sought a favour from him, got it and showed his gratitude by starting a protest against him. His total recount notwithstanding, when the same persons would approach him a second time with yet another plea, the generosity would be

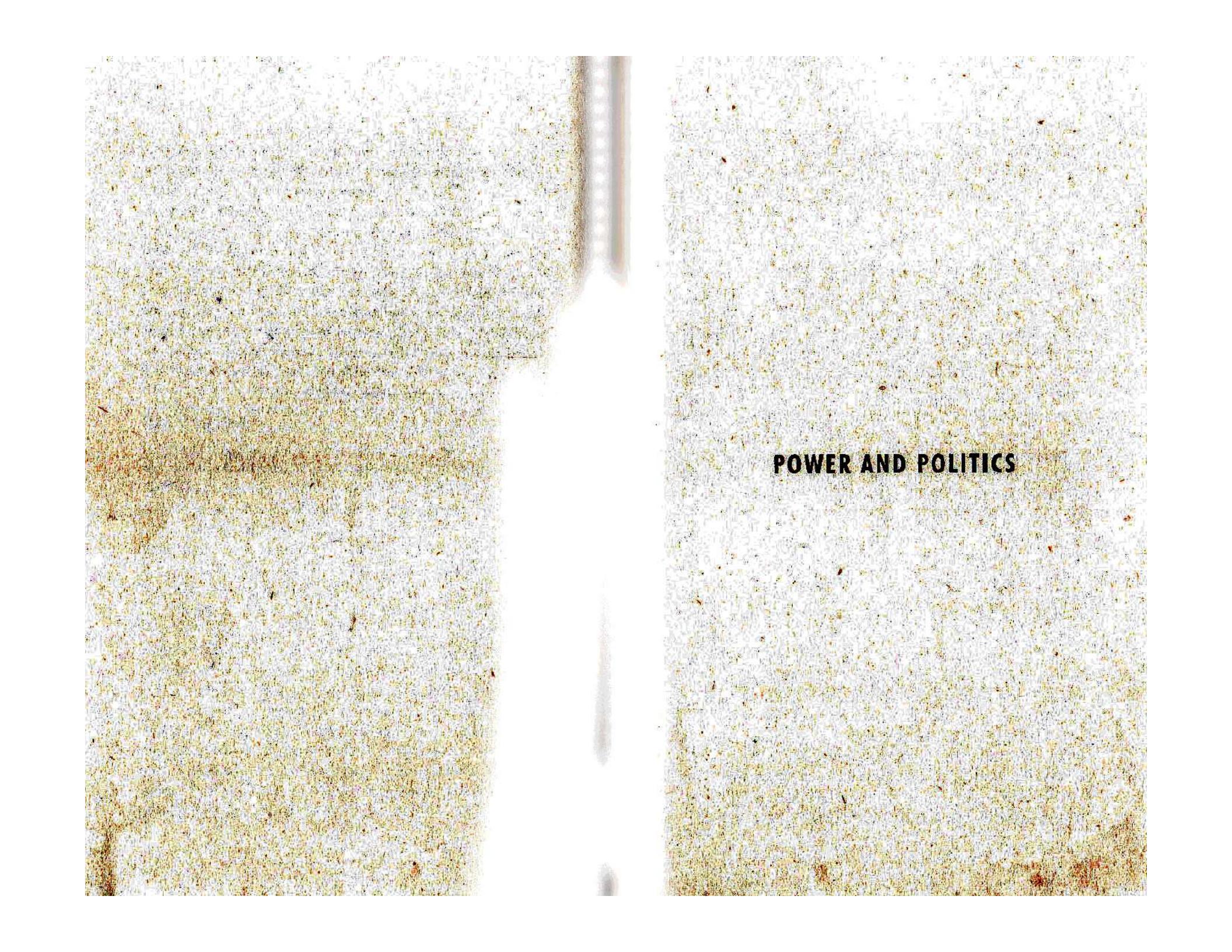
repeated. A communist keeps faith, even unrequited faith. Snehangshu Acharyya would almost invite to be duped in order to prove the point. When tried nearly beyond endurance, he would be caustic, but never malicious or vindictive.

Of course he was an unusual communist. He died as West Bengal's Advocate General. At different times, he had been President of the Indian Football Association and a member of the Council of the Indian Statistical Institute, Chairman of the West Bengal Council of Sports and President of the Cricket Association of Bengal, a member of the Court of Jadavpur University and chairman of scores of cultural and athletic bodies. He had no problem in coalescing cricket with his communism, and he would manouver the sitar or play the tabla with the same effortlessness with which he would sing, full throatedly, the Internationale. He would recite for you, for hours on end, from Tagore or T.S. Eliot or the Kathopanishad, but, then, he also had the best stock in town of scatological stores. As a raconteur, he was unmatched. He could combine his communism with his irreverence; he, being Snehangshu Acharyya, could get away with murder. He would be steadfastly loyal to the party leadership and make faces at the leaders. In Bengal's fractured society, it needs a lot to straddle the expanse between a Jyoti Basu and a Samar Sen. Acharyya could and did.

Bengal's twentieth century renaissance could feel proud to have yielded specimens like Snehangshu Acharyya, it assured the slightly disheveled Bengalis that civilization could go with the communist party. Scoffers of course remained. Acharyya could not stop their doubts, but could at least tell them a rollickingly funny story. They would come back, pining to hear another equally funny anecdote. A few amongst them wondered what made him tick, what granite of faith constituted the base of this man's superstructure. Frustrated at not being able to solve the riddle, they would seek him out once more, and ask for yet another story, or another drink. He would promptly oblige.

Things are not quite the same as they were in the thirties and the forties. The national scene is baffling, and the Left, at the receiving end of the buffettings which began with Nikita Khruschev's Twentieth Congress and traversing the emotional terrains of the uneven developments of the past thirty years, has a periodic identity crisis. It has been a long march of the mind for dedicated communists. At the moment the cardiac arrest claimed him, how did Acharyya sum it all up? Is the flicker of the renaissance the end in itself, are not matters and events going to add up to a majestic qualitative transformation? One can only speculate. He died a proud man, a communist; the dream, he must have assured himself with his very last breath, was of as much worth as its realization would be.

SEPTEMBER, 1987



**POWER AND POLITICS**

## NO ONE CARES FOR THE CONSTITUTION ANY MORE

Unkindness is having its domain; the poor gentleman is being described as a 'do-nothing' prime minister. The maligners could not be more wrong. Has not the prime minister promised a white paper on the Ayodhya episode giving a blow-by-blow account of all that happened? That should silence, once and for all, the traducers.

This is not the hour of frivolity though. This prime minister could have done a hundred things to avoid the occurrence of the most shameful event that has taken place in the country since Independence and has made it the object of contempt to the rest of the world. He could have promulgated an order acquiring the disputed site and put it under the direct surveillance of central security forces. He had the option of recourse to Article 144 of the Constitution, so as to ensure that the writ of the Supreme Court ran at Ayodhya. He could have, as advised by at least one chief minister, invoked Article 355 and intervened, before the event, and forestalled the kind of internal disturbances that engulfed the country. The prime minister in any case invoked Article 356 on the evening of 6 December; he could have reached that decision at high noon itself, at the time the first group of *kar sevaks* stormed the supposedly impregnably guarded structure. The moment the Supreme Court's order had begun to be violated, lightning instructions could have been dispatched to the Rapid Action Force to perform the chore it was eventually called upon to perform thirty-six hours later. Ayodhya is within

half an hour's striking distance of some of the major bases occupied by our air force; it would have been a relatively simple operation to arrange ten or twenty sorties for saturation tear-gas shelling from above of the rabble assembled in the arena. Six hours constitute a pretty long stretch of eternity, within which it is possible to accommodate three consecutive stagings of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, or, suit your taste, *Carolanus*. In case you are sold on Hindutva, in the course of those six hours, Doordarshan could have telecast twelve *Ramayana* serial. The prime minister and his government in their wisdom chose to go into hibernation during those half a dozen hours. True, this statement is not altogether correct, if the prime minister is to be believed, he had made use of these precious hours to ruminate on the breach of trust committed with him by the leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party. As if the fact of his rumination is atonement of and compensation for the effective destruction of the Union of India by a bunch of hoodlums under the benign watchful eyes of the nation's security forces.

It is therefore necessary to be blunt: the issue no longer concerns the competence of this prime minister, but his integrity. For he has not exhibited any contrition, or changed his modality of going about, even after the event. If an administration is seriously intent on prohibiting the activities of certain organizations, it does not serve them several days' notice. Commoners would hence have to be forgiven if they were to conclude that the prime minister was extraordinarily anxious to give these organizations adequate time to set up their underground apparatus and permit the ringleaders of the greatest criminal act this country has ever witnessed to disperse themselves in safe hideouts. The manner of apprehending the principal impresarios of the bestial drama would also appear to have been in the nature of a pre-scripted charade; otherwise these persons would not have been accorded the opportunity of giving interview, replete with inflammatory material, to the

world press following their arrest, nor would such interviews have been carried in fully by Doordarshan and All-India Radio. And what is one to make of the uncontradicted story that the superintendent of police in charge of the sentry posted outside the head-quarters of the banned outfits walked up the stairs to enquire of one of the principal functionaries of the organization whether, please, he had been inconvenienced in any manner. Or of the reported riposte of the Punjab chief minister that any move against the RSS, such a tower of strength for him, would gladden the hearts of the Khalistanis and thereby by implication be anti-national?

Unless the point is conceded that the prime minister in fact belongs to the other camp, quite a few of the developments subsequent to Black Sunday would remain inexplicable. To pick just one example: how come when the Rapid Action Force and other security personnel finally persuaded the kar sevaks to move out and took charge of the disputed premises, they did not simultaneously remove, at one go, the makeshift Ramlala structure the law breakers had installed during the preceding one and a half days they had been allowed to romp about without let or hindrance? Had the *impromptu* structure been demolished at that first opportunity, with the BJP and RSS leadership still very much on the defensive and benumbed at the magnitude of the damage to national interests they had caused, they would have probably accepted that act of demolition as a *fait accompli*. The prime minister, however, was most understanding; such understanding, one is forced to conclude, is the product of very deep empathy. The security forces were under orders not to remove the *impromptu* temple; much worse, priests have been allowed to continue to say their prayers before the idol of lord Rama installed there, and troops were encouraged to prostrate themselves before the idol; at least they were not discouraged from doing so.

The dissembling continues. The Babri mosque, the prime

minister assures, will be re-built. But the moment he is asked whether the mosque is to be re-constructed at exactly the same spot where it existed for close to five centuries, he turns coy. One hundred and odd Members of Parliament belonging to the Congress Party have, conceivably according to instruction issued, contributed their bit of obfuscation: yes, the mosque, they say, must be re-built, but a temple too should be built at the same site. And a group of busybodies in the nation's capital, self-designated foremost thinkers in the country – their point of strength being that whatever inanities they express are immediately carried verbatim by the so called national press – echo the same thought.

Mischief is thus afoot, once more, one suspects, according to a well laid-out plan. Polemicists would now start issuing statements and writing letters to newspaper editors. The burden of these letters and statements would be somewhat as follows. No question what has happened is most shameful and tragic; mother India's heart has been torn asunder: the bloodbath that has made mother India's children hang their heads in remorse and sorrow. A great wrong has been done. The sentiments and susceptibilities of the country's major minority community have been deeply wounded. Proper restitution must be made of the damage that has been done and their feelings must be assuaged. But, given the gravity of the crisis, it is important to act with utmost circumspection. None of us would want to add to the tragedy that has already taken place. The riots and arson and killings have subsided; peace and tranquility are slowly returning in town and country; nothing should be done which could again stoke the fire of unreason. The RSS and Bajrang Dal elements have served notice that they would not countenance the removal of the improvised Ramlala structure they have set up; they would not countenance the suggestion to re-build the Babri Masjid at the old site; any such attempt, and they have threatened to drown the country in another horrible orgy of bloodletting. This threat

could not, after all, be taken lightly. At this hour each citizen belonging to this great nation must search his or her soul; we, each of us, must learn to shed our emotions, rein in even our well founded grievances and concentrate on what in the circumstances would contribute to the greatest good of the minority community itself. Blah-blah of this genre would be continued on radio and television, on the pages of newspapers, and, for all one is able to foretell, at sessions of the National Integration Council. The outcome would be a pile-up of theses and counter-theses, of shibboleths and even more shibboleths. The prime minister would predictably claim to be the greatest of democrats who never deviated from the straight and narrow path; he would take action on the mosque reconstruction business as soon as a national consensus emerged on the matter.

This prime minister may be clever by half, or he may be taken at his face value. It does not matter either way. For the Union of India is, to all intents and purposes, already destroyed. Of course most of the rest of the world has currently reasons to feel superior in relation to us. We have already had a solidly established reputation as scroungers and hypocrites. We have now additionally qualified to belong to a category of savages who do not know where to stop and how to bottle up irrational primal passions. Anarchy, the rest of the world would be entitled to conclude, is the end-point of such an absurdity as India. In any case, India, as she has till now existed, has contributed little either to her own welfare or to the general well-being of the globe. Who knows, a dose of chaos, the rest of the world could rationalise, might actually be the right medicine for this mess of a geography. India might splinter, as the erstwhile Soviet Union has done, or as Yugoslavia has. The rest of the world, its richer and more fortunate segments in particular, would not be overly concerned. Their citizens – or those who take decisions on behalf of these citizens – are great believers in the invisible hand; equilibrium following chaos in the market, they are convinced,

is what the invisible hand invariably succeeds in pulling off; so let it be with India. Besides, they have their domestic preoccupations. If it is a hands-off policy for the whole stretch of eastern Europe, why not a hands-off policy for India as well, and let devil take the hindmost? Everything in good time. Once India gets nicely splintered into twenty or thirty individual fragments, and famine and pestilence begin to stalk some or most of these fragmented terrains, that would be the right moment to pass a United Nations Security Council resolution and arrange for shipment of some food. In case movement of such food aid is seriously impeded by marauding groups in the chaos-ridden territories formerly collectively known as India, the Security Council would possibly pass another resolution requesting the Clinton administration to send a few platoons of US marines to restore law and order and safeguard the distribution of food and victuals to the stricken population. Meanwhile, the finance minister of the country would have the pleasure of having his theism restored: the country was keyed up for a mammoth leap forward in the wake of the stupendous economic reforms he had initiated; foreign investors were about to come in droves, industry was on the point of bubbling over with growth, prices were about to touch an annual rate of increase of less than 1 per cent, and exports would have made unprecedently huge strides. But 6 December put paid to all that; what could he, poor fellow, do?

The finance minister has certainly been gifted a lovely alibi for non-success. Global reaction to the events in India has been uniformly unfavourable, the Organization of Islamic Countries might any day stop sending up crude petroleum. International repercussions would have however little to do with India's discovery of the road of Calvary. The squalid demolition act in Ayodhya has removed at one stroke the moral as well as the legal scaffolding of the nation. It is no longer a secular republic; its government has demonstrated, by its inertness over Ayodhya, that

it either does not believe in, or is incapable of offering protection to secularism. With its secular credential gone, this land mass would now be a regular battlefield, the different communities would gather arms and train cadets so as to attack others and defend themselves, for the government, they know, would not defend them, the symbolism of getting rid of the BJP governments in four states notwithstanding. Too little too late.

An even greater consequence of Ayodhya is the realization that none cares for the claptrap of the Constitution, the rule of law is defunct in the country. The rabble gathered by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and company could not bother about the judiciary and its pronouncements. They made their own law. That would now emerge as the general pattern. If you want to travel henceforth in this miserable country, it has to be along an ill-defined network of lawless roads. The insurrectionists in Kashmir, Punjab, Assam and Andhra Pradesh would be the greatest beneficiaries of this collapse of legality. They would have, from now on, precedents to quote in defence of their conduct of cocking the snook at so-called upholders of law and order.

The prime minister should not be arraigned or maligned. He should be praised and felicitated. He has been instrumental in demolishing the fiction of India. India was always a myth. Public relations stood in the way of exploding that myth. Sooner or later, truth will be out. The truth is now out, thanks to the prime minister. History will unquestionably consider him as perhaps the greatest prime minister this fale of a country ever had. And possibly the last one.

But, then, the formal demise of the Mughal empire took quite a few decades. Despite Boris Yeltsin, the Commonwealth of Independent States, will, in all probability, totter along for a few further years. Even for decrepit Indians, it could therefore yet be an excruciatingly long wait.

\* A SCINDIA CAN NOW BE A NEHRU

What went wrong? Or could it be that nothing went wrong, whatever was bound to happen has started to happen, it is only our erstwhile historiography which has proved woefully deficient? Scions of native princes and princelings, with *taluqdar*s thrown in (who, it was naively assumed the nation had got rid of, once and for ever, during the late forties and the early fifties,) have assumed charge as effective rulers of the country. They are managing the ruling party, they are managing the government. Their culture has emerged as the ruling culture, and their ideas are the ruling ideas. Watch the advertisements in the newspapers or on the television. The message of affluence which they propagate is, you may think, ill matched for a country in our kind of plight. You are mistaken: your ideas do not belong, these advertisements – and the milieu they represent – therefore nothing surprising when, going by the evidence of the public media, universal acclamation greets the abolition of estate duty and the drastic reduction in corporate and personal income tax rates, or when employees in the public sector are compulsorily retired taking advantage of Articles 310 and 311 of the Constitution, or when, in public discussions, the market price of colour television to push out the price of foodgrains as the principal cause of concern. It is also natural that nostalgia for British rule is being so openly aired; the jewels are pining for the crown that was once their adornment.

Most of what is happening, it can be argued, are aspects of crystallization of class positions. True, this crystallization has been delayed; the process has been excruciatingly slow. But, then, just remember Satyajit Ray's film – nothing is more archetypal Indian – than the slow pace of things. It has been a slow and long haul, but now finally, the bits and pieces are falling to their places. While one's reach is the country's finance minister, another is the ruling party's executive vice-president and a third one is responsible for the nation's defence. The rajahs and *taluqdar*s went out with the British, but have come back with Jawaharlal Nehru's grandson. It took them a couple of generations to get back their bearings. Capitalism in this country may be straining at the leash, to break out and show the dazzle of its teeth; the leash, one should, however, have the humility to realize, is very much in the safe clasp of feudal masters of impeccable breech.

Given the structure of molecules which is the Indian National Congress, this denouement was predictable. 1857 had railed the British. Dying feudalism was a bundle of envy and complexes; despite the charters and treaties, it could not be divested of its hang-ups. Which is why a new formation was called for, the security of the Empire ought to count as supreme. This new formation, to begin with mostly consisted of a professional pot-pourri: *munshis* and stevedores, lawyers and physicians, occasional scholar-professors and skilled administrators. But even where they did not have feudal roots, they in no time learnt to sprout such roots; they started buying real estate, certainly in towns and cities, and not so infrequently, in the countryside too. In the immediate aftermath of 1857, the remnants of old feudalism were sulking; in any event, they were a little unsure of themselves; the new set of quasi-feudals, with a strong professional base, could easily fill into a supplanting role. The British made them; their sense of loyalty towards the foreign masters therefore had a strong objective foundation. Their sudden appearance had, with a certain time-lag, a salutary effect

on the mores and manners of the old feudal elements too: your days of day-dreaming are over, stop building castles in the air, the British are here for ever, you can see for yourselves that you are dispensable, so why don't you give in and learn to behave? Queen Victoria's emissaries are understanding, once you accept their nominees as your advisers and *dewans*, everything will turn up hunky-dory, your jewels will be kept with you, the paraphernalia of your suzerainty will be left unharmed, you will, each of you continue to be entitled to appropriate gun salutes, all you have to do is to pay an annual tribute to the British and transfer your internal administration to the care of the dewan suggested by the viceroy or his resident mission, and, oh, yes, please do keep your womanizing within limits. The ploy paid off. The Chamber of Princes, representing the *menagerie* of left-over native royalty, emerged as the most docile of bodies, and obediently made their heavily bejewelled appearance at the diamond jubilee celebrations at the turn of the century and at each similar subsequent ceremony. The Queen's son and successor, Edward the Seventh allegedly the Ripper, was a debauch much in their own image.

Meanwhile, the new feudal class had proceeded to flourish in their own manner. They had piled money, and their expertise in law-had allowed them to buy into land, send their children to Harrow and Eton, and from there on to Oxford and Cambridge. Some of the children, apart from picking degrees and getting admitted to the Inns, were also initiated into cricket, a game which the native princes, for whatever reasons, also learnt to play, with reasonable proficiency, along with polo. The two strata of feudalism, new and old, thus began to come into being from around the beginning of the twentieth century.

Inter-marrying came somewhat later, say, from towards the close of the period between the two wars. In the interim, the neo-feudals had succeeded in pocketing the Indian National Congress. Nationalism was in dire need of strident spokesmen;

the new class did a quick arithmetic, of course they filled the bill, nationalism filled their bill too. Since nature abhors vacuum, and unlike the old royalty, the neo-feudals did not for a moment believe that the British could be for eternity, they did their advance planning and captured the Congress Party. Of even greater significance, they also succeeded in capturing Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The Congress by itself was not much of a prize but it was a major coup that they won over Mahatma Gandhi as well. Consider the vista of advantages an opportunities suddenly opened up before them. They were already strongly entrenched in the professions; they had infiltrated among the landed gentry; their daughters, after a show beginning, had taken to marrying into the families of up-and-coming industrialists; their sons, a fair number of them, were entrenched in the Indian Civil Services, and most of the rest were ensconced in assorted mercantile firms. The conquest of the Indian National Congress, along with Mahatma Gandhi, marked the climacteric of their achievements. The superstructure appropriated the base.

Everything was ready for the transfer of power to the neo-feudals. With each year, the khadi turned finer and finer. These usurping leaders of the Indian National Congress themselves knew, as much as the British did, that the bouts of prison-going, alternating with occasional ministry formation in the provinces and fire-spouting oration at the *chowpatty*, the *maidan* and the Central Legislative Assembly, were preparatory work for the assumption of power once Whitehall had made up its mind. Even at that stage, these leaders could not of course do without Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. As Subhas Chandra Bose had learnt to his cost, a formal triumph within the Congress party meant nothing without benediction from the foxy old saint. He represented the chemistry of communion with the people. Jawaharlal Nehru's abstract discourses on socialism were an irrelevance. It will remain one of the major unravelled mysteries

in Indian history: the factor or factors which impelled Mahatma Gandhi to agree to the coronation of Nehru as the true inheritor of what passed as the ethos of the Indian National Movement. Was it an inferiority complex at the point of confrontation with the refinement which defined the new class and which the Nehrus epitomized? Was it a feudal law re-asserting itself: never mind your spiritual prowess, never mind the magic spell you cast over the masses, you have to transfer your titles and deeds to the truly aristocratic ones, who, since the days Plato said so, constitute the natural leaders?

The Nehrus and their like got the bequest. But appearance had to be kept up. The khadi had to be spun finer and finer; to give it up altogether would have been regarded as a sacrilege. The well-meaning clichés which constituted the portmanteau of policies and programmes of the Indian National Congress could not be scuttled just like that. The totems and the taboos, both, had to be outwardly conformed to. Socialism and the public sector had to be provided pride of place in the administrative directives. Mahatma Gandhi, quietly and obligingly, had passed on the inheritance, but it had to be handled with care, a sudden rush of blood would not do. The rich and the affluent would of course inherit India, but, to begin with, there must be no ostentation; hasten slowly.

Of course, you must learn which is which and that the essentials are more important than the details. Therefore, in due season that is, when the time came to draft the constitution of the independent nation, some of the more dangerous clichés of the Congress Party were clipped. As late as in 1942, in the Quit India Resolution itself, there was a reference about how the nation unshackled from the British would be shaped into an immaculate federal entity, with all residuary powers resting with the constituent States. The folly of the pledge was repeated in the party programme during the 1946 election campaign. This and similar indiscretions were, post haste, taken care of. India would

be ruled by a strong Centre. And the Centre would be ruled by a fusion of the federal elements, old and new.

It has taken the whole of two generations for the dream to come true. The old feudals, and the neo-feudals have, during this period, increasingly come closer as per the rules of nature; they have inter-married, and they have swapped historical notes. The convergence of class interests has obliterated the hiatus of disparate roots: a Scindia and a Nehru and now indistinguishable, a Rana and a Sapru are a natural fit. Their grey business suit and the khadi kurta-churidar are inter-changeable apparel. Let the mountain come to Mohammed. It has come: the Indian National Congress had sold itself, lock, stock and barrel, ideology, idiosyncrasies and pretensions everything included, to the rajahs of yore, who are the rajahs of today. Even dialectical materialism does not scoff at the reality of such cycles of history, which is why it stresses the dichotomy between tragedy and farce. A *talukdar* deputising as finance minister will of course abolish estate duty. The *front populaire* of the rich, once reasonably assured that their inheritance is for ever, will of course lower corporate and personal income tax rates. They will of course be wont to go on a binge and free the import of luxury consumer articles. And since the poor will supposedly always be with them, they will, with much fanfare, launch every now and then on what they would love to describe as anti-poverty programmes. The ancient kings excavated tanks in times of distress as part of protective works; the modern rajahs will show that they too could do all that, and perhaps on an even bigger scale, vindicating the Asiatic Mode.

As another budget approaches, rest assured, you will have more of the same. The past is a present fact.

## THE POOR HAVE BEEN MARKED DEFUNCT

Economics text-books in the olden days used to have a chapter tucked in on the theme of purchasing power parity. That practice has been discarded. Concepts such as of purchasing power parity, are perhaps hazardous, and could have proved that at least some of the supposed axioms currently bandied about by those who have converted economic science into a cartel do not quite make sense.

The Indian rupee, say savants from the World Bank and the Monetary Fund, is over-valued. The rupee, echoes the domestic comprador crowd, which includes our very proper civil servants, is over-valued, its external value must be adjusted downwards every now and then. The stray American tourist let loose in the Indian bazaars, will be surprised. His or her experience tells a different story: a reasonably representative bundle of goods he or she can buy with, let us say, sixteen Indian rupees in any Indian market, whether in Sitapur or in Madurai, is much, much more than what an American dollar will buy in any shopping plaza at Wichita, Kansas or College Station, Texas. Disputes can of course arise over what is 'reasonably representative'. Where the transaction, however, involves an Indian product marked by a sizeable direct labour input, the official rate of exchange is an ass, the Indian rupee, there can be no question, is scandalously under-valued. And this fact carries within itself a sub-fact, that of a second-order exploitation. Assuming that population is growing at a high rate and resources and opportunities are

monopolized by a very thin section at the top of the social order, the nation's majority in any event have, all the while, surplus value extracted out of them. Manipulation of the rate of exchange of the national currency becomes the deus ex machine for a further round of exploitation. With each act of devaluation, the labour embodied in the goods and services produced at home is exploited a second time, this time by foreigners, courtesy the nation's economic policy put together by indigenous bureaucrats, including economist-bureaucrats, and foreign advisers. It is the great Indian loot. The foreign tourist cannot believe his or her luck; he or she rushes in and indulges in a bit of free loading. We also succeed to sell in the overseas market a few extra units of this or that commodity our workers have assembled by the sweat of their brow. Our commerce minister hurriedly calls a press conference and makes the proud announcement hallelujah, our days of worry are over during the preceding year or the preceding quarter, the country's exports have advanced by 20 per cent or 30 per cent. All he means is that the process of exploitation of Indian labour by foreigners has further intensified during that year or quarter by perhaps this percentage.

There is little scope for any hyperbole. Our exports fare reasonably well with respect to only those products which call for a considerable application of human skills and exertion: fabrics and handicrafts, leather goods, gems and jewellery. It is a virtual impasse elsewhere. Depreciation of the rupee, over and over again, has failed to promote the export of goods with a low labour content; subsidies have not helped either. The conventional demand and supply elasticities receive their come-uppance. Equipments, particularly where they are imported, refuse to have their value squeezed beyond a point. It is different with manual workers, they are more vulnerable, they are often not unionized, one can frighten them into agreeing to lowered real wages. The commerce minister takes pride that exports have

moved up. Instead, he should be ashamed of himself that such a phenomenon has taken place. But, then, in a class-divided society, somebody's poison is somebody else's meat. The extra exports the poor workers bring about by the sweat of their brow will ensure the extra foreign exchange necessary to buy this of that luxury goods overseas.

One must, however, temporize. To claim that the Indian rupee is undervalued in relation to foreign currencies all along the line will not be a one hundred per cent honest or truthful statement. The statement will be correct in terms of the experience of a majority of the national population. But we are in the Arrowian era. The Impossibility Theorem reigns supreme, a community preference function has no legitimacy, the nation's majority are no judge of what is good or bad for the nation as a whole. It is in any case not universally true that the Indian rupee is undervalued. For those who hanker after consumer goods of a certain quality not available in the domestic market, the official rate of exchange is not realistic; since life is not worth living without these goods, they are prepared to part with many more Indian rupees to obtain the necessary units of foreign currency with which to buy such goods than what the official rate of exchange asks them to. Since not enough of foreign exchange is available to satisfy the urge for foreign goods emanating from these sections, there is a left-over demand for foreign currency, the shadow price of foreign exchange therefore shoots up, and the so-called free-market price of the dollar or the yen soars against the rupee. This provides the opportunity to foreign advisers and domestic civil servants to exculpate, jointly and independently, their consideration; they recommend another round of devaluation of the rupee.

Or it could be they feel passionate about a particular model of economic growth. This model has a built-in bias for equipment and state-of-the-art technologies available only in foreign countries. It is thus intensely import-using; once

economic policy is refashioned according to its *diktat*, the demand for foreign exchange skyrockets. The Impossibility Theorem does not stand in the way, the growth model is imposed on the majority of the nation by those in authority. Since they have been democratically elected, they have the prerogative, they claim, to draw up plans and unfurl strategies of growth according to their own wisdom; even if the majority are harmed thereby, ah, well, and latter have to lump it, at least till the next general election. It is a moot point. For the present, the rules flaunt their mandate, the keep setting rates of exchange for the Indian currency which satisfy their sectarian notions. The basic point is not negated thereby though: what they embark upon is a class policy. The rate of exchange they fix from time to time for the Indian rupee gladdens the hearts of foreigners, it is also intended to serve the interests of the thin minority at the top who wallow in haute couture and other such frivolities. It is, however, the height of officiousness to palm off this kind of exchange rate policy as a national policy, intended to promote the greatest good of the nation's greatest numbers. As the policy has in fact been pursued, it has been little less than a declaration of total war against the poor, who have little of other resources except their labour to offer in the marketplace; since the vast majority amongst them are still without the benefit of collective bargaining, they are vulnerable to pressure applied from outside, they have no real defence against the lowering of their level of living which each depreciation of the rupee brings about.

The rich, or at least those who regulate the national economy on behalf of the rich, cherish the hope that currency depreciation will ultimately lead to an increase in their level of real income. They therefore enjoy a psychological satisfaction from each bout of currency depreciation. Whether, over the long run, their expectations are fulfilled, and their real incomes rise, is a different matter altogether. And of course for foreigners, an Indian devaluation, such as takes place once or twice every week

or thereabouts with the Reserve Bank of India setting new sets of rates of exchange for the rupee, is occasion to gloat over. It is an offering of gift by the Indian community to the foreigners: please, be considerate, pay, from now on, a lower price for our goods and our labour than what you were wont to pay till today, we will be beholden to you. A lowering of the exchange rate is official authorization to foreigners to increase the rate of exploitation of this country's products, and, by inference, this country's workers. Provided he has the right class background, the commerce minister should feel proud. He does.

With a different model of economic growth, an alternative package of economic practices, or a set of rules with another kind of class background, the aggregate demand for foreign exchange, as expressed in the market, is likely to undergo a change. Whether the Indian rupee is over or under-valued will, in these changed circumstances, have to be determined afresh. The shadow price of foreign exchange, in other words, is not a constant. It alters with persons and situations. It shifts in accordance with the class character of the person weighing up the price. It also shifts in accordance with the attitude to certain basic economic issues the government of the day holds.

Much of all this is commonplace; their iteration will put to sleep the bright civil servants and even brighter economists-in-residence. What is commonplace is not, however, always garbage. Export or perish, says the cliché. The nation's poor, on whose behalf decisions are taken and who are always taken for granted, were they at all aware of what is what, could have snarled back: export and perish. Kenneth Arrow is, however, the good Samaritan in all seasons. Since the community as a concept is supposed to be not valid, a formulation associating currency depreciation with a general exploitation of the nation has to be ruled out. On the same ground, there could be no such thing as imperialism; colonialism and neo-colonialism too have to be ordained as illegitimate categories. Such is the verdict of

abstraction-loving economic theoreticians. Unfortunately – or is it fortunately, one does not know, it all depends on one's value system – social realities to fit into supposedly logical slots. Classes exist, as do foreign marauders. Some classes exploit other classes, some nations similarly exploit other nations. Adjusting the external value of the Indian rupee downwards is akin to an act of exploitation; a particular class, because it controls the levels of power, is in a position to use the exchange rate policy to try to put the nation's poor out of existence. And this class builds bridges of understanding with foreign elements, who are equally happy with the exploitative arrangements. Comprador capitalism has many facets. Its servitors are well spread out; they are as much in the North Block as on Mint Road, besides the quiet beautiful university campuses. The chapter on purchasing power parity has been taken off from the text-books. No young boy or girl, innocence writ large on his or her face, will now have the chance to ask inconvenient questions on the relative purchasing power of sixteen Indian rupees and a single American dollar. It all depends on who wants to purchase, and what he or she wants to purchase. It also depends from whom it is proposed to purchase. We live in a world of malleable values.

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## THE INDUCED VIOLENCE

Does life imitate sociology, or the latter, wrapped in perspicacity, warn in advance of developments that are coming? This itself could be theme for a sociological debate. Forty years ago, or still earlier, in the pre-Independence phase, the nation's awareness of the labyrinth of caste fissures was much less than it is today. Formulating a Lukacesque explanation for this is of course not so difficult. Lack of awareness, we will be assured, does not clinch the case for lack of existence. There are those standard stages of inchoate and choate realities, of levels of perception of reality, and, finally, of levels of articulation of what is perceived at a point of time. Why shoot the piano player, the troubles engulfing us have been brought about not by sociologists with a vested interest in nurturing the myth of caste warfare. What is happening, it will be said, is basically a function of time. The caste alignments were already there, a landless farm worker always felt a greater bond of affinity with an oppressing landlord where the latter belonged to the same caste as him rather than with another dispossessed peasant whose economic plight was identical to his own but whose caste was different. In the past, he was able neither to define his emotion nor trace its locus of identity. Forces released by national Independence have been a great civilizer. The Indian villager is now discovering that the laws of nature ordain that he be a collective animal and seek, for dear life, the protection of near and dear ones. It is caste which, for him, is delimiting friends from adversaries. Ideologues notwithstanding, pure

economic relations are, alas, non-determining factors towards social equilibration. Such relations at most reflect the turmoil occasioned by spasmodic events; caste links, on the other hand, carry the burden of a much longer history of love and non-love, of hatred and lack of hatred, of acceptance and rejection from the fold. Truth will be out, and it is now supposedly emerging with a vengeance. Sociologists, being more perceptive than, say, economists of a particular genre, had a head start in divining what was about to explode in rural India. There is no question of their loving caste war more than class war. The divisiveness of caste is the reality, that of class is an abstract hypothesis. They have only succeeded in laying bare, sociologists will argue, the datum of caste alignments in village after village, district after district, region after region; the castes were already there, all they did was to delineate them in reckonable terminology. They did not instigate the caste riots; they just rang the early warning bells.

There are those who will tend to take a sourer view. They will leave out the innocuous specimens from obscure universities situated in the cow belt of the United States of America, who, not very bright, but deadly serious in intents, swarm like leeches all over the countryside of Uttar Pradesh, or Tamil Nadu or Karnataka, or some other state. Each adopted a village, and diligently wrote a Ph.D. dissertation. They detailed the number of dug wells and of pucca aquaducts in the village, narrated the features of the dominant marriage customs and the annual fertility rites, made a taxonomic analysis of land-holdings and cropping patterns, dwelt at length on the local terracotta and temple architecture. They finally put down a meticulous description of the different castes inhabiting the village. This they did to pad the thesis, and also because had they not been told any number of times about India's unique caste system? It would have been singular lack of manners, they surmised, if, having latched on to an Indian village and based a Ph.D. thesis on its characteristics and attributes, they chose to ignore the castes.

Alongside such tales of innocence, however, there could be - and are - more purposive exponents of the sociological art, nurturing a built-in urge to embark on ideological battles, class war is evil. Class divisions are a legend spread by malevolent Marxists. They have to be countered. Academic pursuits can no longer afford to stick to passive positions. Moreover, is it not the Marxists who were the first to provoke us? Now we have to counter-attack. Class consciousness, we must establish, is not the prime mover in human inter-relations, a stronger surrogate exists. It is the awareness about caste and the pride one feels in identifying with it. Caste consciousness, besides, can never blend into class consciousness. Caste and class are antithetical categories, with distinct non-competing empirical correlates.

Dig into the records, you will be struck by the heavy bias in sociological research in the post-Independence decades; exploring the manifold facets of the mystique of caste has been the focus of a huge majority of both government-sponsored project reports and university doctoral submissions. Also, it was not always an autonomous seeking after truth, there was a large induced element in it. The story of India's villages had to be the story of stark, unrelenting, unmitigated poverty. Man is a rational animal; even an ordinary research worker could not help being a rational animal. Once confronted with the phenomenon of poverty, he or she, sooner or later, would begin to worry over the material factors underlying poverty. This would not be desirable, since many skeletons in the cupboard were likely to be revealed. So why not persuade the research worker to get interested in caste? Caste became the safety valve, involvement in caste research meant that the young Ph.D. student would no longer have the time or the inclination to bother about such aspects of rural life as the distribution of asset-holdings or the rate of interest charged by the moneylender.

Is it too simple-minded an explanation? Serendipity is as serendipity does. Caste, it did not take long to discover, could be

put to even more purposive use. Lobbies could be organized around castes. Since caste war was axiomatically preferable to class war - and the deployment of research funds implied that the political establishment went along with this view creating conditions for facilitating the former, it was taken for granted would have sanction from above. Sociological research thus came in handy, certainly up to a point. Sociologists knew all about castes. They had already done the scouting, mapped in detail the caste alignments, or at least hinted at the potential that exists along such lines, in region a, b or c. Deprivation defines the Indian countryside, it is possible to come at any given moment with an impressive list of the good things of life denied to each community or caste. It needs only a minor streak of imagination then to develop the framework of a formidable-sounding syllogism. The deprivation of my caste is causally related to the hegemony of that other caste; life is not worth living if the government does not bestir itself to correct the imbalance of advantage that has ensued. The lobbyists, of assorted description, in due course emerge as caste heroes. Perhaps the caste or castes they represent obtain a little bit extra, in some manner or other, because of their shouting. The lobbyists, however, gain very much more. They flaunt themselves as selfless leaders, but, they are not at all bashful to take what they consider their rightful claim as commission agents. It is agency which pays in several ways. The constituents of the caste contribute a levy, in whatever form, in recognition of the good done to them. The political establishment too realizes the worth of the lobbyists as organizers of vote banks. Rewards follow quickly - cash flows, a lucrative contract, allotment of a constituency for contesting the state assembly or Lok Sabha election, perhaps, if the gods are willing, a ministership.

Academic sociologists, with their pet ideological bias, are left far behind. Politicians ride on the crest of sociology. Caste emerges as the fulcrum of a swinging spoils system. In a country of nearly eight hundred million, with a thousand echelons or

administration and layers and layers of hierarchical relations, the more-the-merrier principle has a magnetic attraction. The spoils have to be divided among a million contenders, therefore a million castes, with their separate persona and ego, need to be discovered. They are discovered in no time, with leaders and followers neatly arranged. These leaders have their patrons and in their turn they themselves patrons. Even the highest of the land look upon them with admiring eyes. They are feted and cuddled; they will help keep the starving Indian masses away from straying into the marsh of ideology.

But is there not something unnatural in the goings-on? Castes are adjuncts of tribal societies, classes are a later development. Caste and tribes are caught at a still point of pre-history. Classes, in contrast, encompass a whole lot of memory, experience and convulsions, while synoptically passing as the dynamics of the historical process. There is a majesty and intensity around class wars, they encompass a lot of waiting and preparation, as also a great deal of thought and planning; designs are coaxed to grow into strategies, strategies are persuaded to fit into a magnificent historical framework. Hardly anything is left to random factors in these designs, which place the utmost stress on coherence between long-range objectives and short-term targets.

Caste wars, in contrast, are unplanned, chaotic episodes. Castes and tribes are no nationalities, they function within a narrow geographical orbit, and thrive on instant reactions; the accent in their activism is on revenge and vendetta. No global 'schemata of social restructuring' is relatable to the caste riots that break out from time to time. Those who lead them are, more often than not, men of commerce; the mischief they set in motion, will, they hope, yield a sizeable rate to them personally. The tribes they lead, are, however, not interested in heuristic calculations *per se*. The clashes they indulge in are exclusively cathartic in content blood letting cannot be anything else – but it is catharsis which involves only the animal urges, and precisely

nothing else. Tribal feuds therefore involve a considerable lot of brutality. They are also iterative. Since in such wars one tribe takes another tribe by surprise – just look up the etymology of the expression 'ambush' and surprise is a game all can play, these feuds assume the format of successive returning of compliments. Till as long as the tribes do not die out, the nasty, short, brutish wars continue as not all together necessary side shows in the development of civilization.

There has also been a mix-up in the time-frame. Politicians, both on account of the exigency of adult suffrage and out of fear of class formation, have gone on encouraging tribal wars. They have let loose a Pandora's box. For the castes are not operating in a primitive setting; they now receive both sophisticated arms and technological advice from mercenaries from all over; they have the chance to link up with the urban lumpen-proletariat. Professional goons, their guns ever itching to be on hire, have taken over the caste wars. They have learnt to divide up districts much in the manner of mafia groups. Caste discontent has been rendered into only a mask; it is the material advancement of the goods which has emerged as the principal item of the agenda.

What is unfolding before our eyes is no passion play, but the humdrum details of a political anatomy lesson. Tribal wars have their use to stall, temporarily, the historical process; with their help, the act of articulation on the part of the economic classes can be suspended midway for some while. But a heavy price has to be paid, witness the primitive violence in our midst which, with every passing day, threatens to assume anarchic proportions. Perhaps, to those who pull the strings, anarchy is to be preferred to reasoned class confrontation. They have taken upon themselves a frighteningly enormous responsibility. They wear this burden lightly; a blissful lot, they do not have to bother about the organic link between causes and consequences.

## THE BEGINNING WAS THE END

One evening three hundred years ago, an English soldier of fortune was proceeding upstream along the Hooghly beyond the sandheads. It was wretched weather: heavy rains, accompanied by a gale, were lashing down; he chose to come ashore. Inertia took over. His retinue settled themselves over three marshy villages: the settlement in course of time got to be known by the name of Calcutta. Because of this happenstance, the East India Company too came ashore here. One thing led to another, including the rise of the Bengali *bhadralok*, easy to distinguish because of his smattering of English and his undying faith that he had hitched his fate to the right stars. The fate of Calcutta and that of the *bhadralok* in fact intermeshed. The trauma of 1857 followed, the British Crown decided to take direct control of the conquered territories in the sub-continent, the Indian empire was formally proclaimed. Calcutta remained the epicentre of this development, the second half of the nineteenth century turning out to be its apotheosis. It was the apotheosis for the *bhadralok* too. Strategically and climatically, Calcutta was, however, an inappropriate location from where to conduct imperial rule. The British corrected the mistake as soon as the twentieth century arrived; Calcutta's and the *bhadralok*'s brief hour of crowning glory was over. It has been a long moping session for both of them since. Till 1947 certain economic compulsions stood in the way of the city being totally

written off. The left-over inhibition disappeared following Independence. Following Independence, for the past forty years nitty-gritty realities have stared the pestilential city in the face. No settlement, once it comes up, does quite die—it decays perhaps steadily, perhaps filthily, over decades and centuries. The state of exile from authority, however, tells.

This exclusion from power-political, and therefore economic power, is about the most essential fact concerning Calcutta. It explains the process of under-development and de-industrialization which has been the centrepiece of its history in the past quarter of a century. The other factors generally mentioned – lack of infrastructure, lazy over-politicized Bengali labour, the breakdown of social discipline is incidental footnotes: they embellish the annals, but are unable on their own, to make any major contributions to the shaping of destiny. That stellar performance is reserved for the phenomenon of Bengal ceasing to matter in the grand design which is India.

The impact of the phenomenon has been felt at two levels. Due to the manner the national polity has evolved Bengal is now of peripheral importance to the union. Of equal relevance, however, is the mental attitude: the *bhadralok*, who continues to play the dominant role even in an environment nominally under heavy leftist siege, is yet to come to terms with the shell-shock he experienced eighty years ago. He is still observing the wake, and, meanwhile, could not care less about what is happening around him or to him. In a kind of quasi-detachment he watches, and occasionally condemns or admires the drama of seizure of power and its deployment but he himself does not want to be a part of it. He belongs to the nation and yet is actually an outsider. He has trained himself to believe that once the British chose to desert him, the party was, for him, over. He has, therefore withdrawn from the stage, and moved galleries. He takes note of happenings in the country but does not consider himself responsible for them; he feels both superior and left out.

The tragedy has a sequel. The *bhadralok* has not decided yet to cease to exist. It is only his degree of freedom which is constricted because of the particular frame of mind he has chosen to adhere to. He is accustomed to the role of servitor-comprador the British had trained him for. Now the calamity of calamities – he now has to serve not the foreign masters, but inferior specimens from within the sub-continent itself. As a result he occasionally proposes to rebel. There is a dichotomy is here, an ambivalence, which creates a mess. The *bhadralok* tends to mix up his two roles. These roles he forgets are alternative propositions, they cannot be stepped into at the same time. The *comprador* thus struts about in the belief that he is the rebel, and resents it when the applause is not forthcoming. The would-be rebel too stumbles on his role; he does not do the homework – as a servitor he got used to easy pickings. He lacks the stamina to last the stretch. The bang turns into a whimper, the hanger-on supplants the high minded rebel. In Andhra Pradesh, partisans keep ablaze the torch of rebellion lit twenty seasons ago. In Bengal where it began, all is quiet on all fronts, and many amongst those who organized the incendiaries of the prairie fire of the late sixties or early seventies now quietly compose ‘creative’ copy for advertising firms. If you are in need of another illustration of basically the same reality here is one independent India’s first minister of industries Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, a formidable *bhadralok* who did not last long.

The *bhadralok* is not given to handling power; he is, for the present, equally ill-equipped to lead an uprising; so he makes a hash of things at both ends. While it would be pretentious to describe this as the collective curse, there is at least one fact of times past which provides an explanatory note. Throughout history, the Bengalis could never identify themselves with any empire or kingdom. The populace of Aryavarta did not have to suffer from this infirmity; they took to empires as duck takes to water; even when they received no tangible benefits from the

exploits of their rulers, they at least had the satisfaction of integrating into the imperial ethos, which was good for their soul, much in the manner Napoleon’s conquests were good for the soul of the plebeian French.

Rajputana was of course always the land of kings. The Magadhis had their bit of the Mauryan empire. The subcontinent’s middle tracts were, for several centuries, literally infested with kingdoms. The Marathas built a major empire. Gujarat too could boast of kings who not only plundered but built temples and ships. In the east one reads of Kalinga kings whom Asoka subjugated. Should you want to travel further yonder, those tough Ahom kings created problems not only for Arjuna in the Mahabharata days, but also for the British as late as the early nineteenth century. It is only in Bengal, whatever the epoch or century you dip in, that it is almost impossible to locate any significant local political formations. There is no record in history of any Bengali empire; it is difficult to come across even minor Bengali kings; now and then, only one or two chieftains (or those who held fiefs and collected revenue on behalf of superiors) were absentmindedly around.

Geography presumably played a part, the marshy tracts and the humid climate could be corrosive of initiatives. Since the spirit was unwilling it was perhaps impossible to evoke even minimal organizational skills or royal ambitions to establish autonomous set-ups. The pattern of human migrations perhaps contributed its bit. Much in the manner of the cattle route in the middle centuries which originated in Kohat in Baluchistan and ended just a little beyond Patna in Rajmahal, the quality of cattle markedly deteriorating even as the route meandered eastwards, human migration too led to the unloading of physically the most decrepit specimens on the plains of Bengal. Occasional import of superior stock did not help. Be that as it may, in the course of the fastidious spells of history, the Bengalis failed to climb into the imperial bandwagon. They stayed as sheep in sheep’s clothing.

Others expanded their kingdoms, but the Bengalis watched from a distance. They did not want (and were incapable) of getting involved in such dangerous adventures. They chose the role of servitors, carrying out orders and waiting patiently for the modest *bucksheesh*.

Once the British settled in Calcutta, the Bengalis thus took it as a natural arrangement; whoever subjugated them was their lord and master. Besides, for the first time in history, a most unusual occurrence had taken place: the centre of the empire was right here, on Bengal's marshy, humid tracts. This was the chance for the Bengalis to be integrated into an empire, really and truly, and be flesh of its flesh. The *bhadralok* availed of the opportunity.Flushed with pride, he considered himself to be the major domo. He did not ever dream that one day, he could himself inherit this empire, all that he and his peers had to do was not to let go of the historical advantage which had come their way. He muffed the chance: the Indian National Congress he let drift into other hands. Habit dies hard. He was more than satisfied in his limited role, serving the regime, receiving in exchange spoils of a minor genre, either permanently settled land, or small professions. Very infrequently, in addition, in trade or business, he would don the livery of the obliging comprador too.

When the British decided to ditch him and carried the capital of the empire elsewhere, the *bhadralok* was caught napping. He was left with Calcutta to look after. The benefits of imperial association became defunct, the burden of maintaining an imperial infrastructure increased with every day. Independence has accentuated the anomaly: control over power.

The *bhadralok* watches, as a disinterested bystander, from a thousand miles away. Or perhaps he does not even watch any longer. The ambivalence in his temperament shows. The realities of daily existence are grating, and makes him take to reading Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao, or even further, Gramsci. He is

nonetheless unable to forsake the manners of the born servitor. True, the rebel on occasion challenges the docility of the babu. Did not his people contribute their share during the nation's struggle of freedom; did they not supply more than the usual quota of martyrs; did they not also come up with the slogan which in that phase bound the nation together, *Vande Mataram*; did they not chip in with the National Anthem too? Such effervescence soon dies down, the *bhadralok* knows his place, he does not seriously intend to compete to be in the centre of power. While he may, given the exigencies of climate restless on certain day, he will not cross the rubicon. Bharat Mata will always have precedence over Sonar Bangla. The Naxalite ferment thus demurely dies down. Nature's symmetry asserts itself, everything fits with every other thing. The residual Bengali passion expands itself in dotting the i's and crossing the t's of the countless memoranda on centre-states relations. It is left to a chief minister from the south to try to frighten the central authorities with the prospect of a nationalism firing his ideology, no *bhadralok* would like to talk in such terms; that would be singular lack of manners. Whatever else you might hold against him, a servitor never loses his manners.

It is therefore considered both important and necessary for the *bhadralok* to observe the completion of three hundred years of chance-directed existence of the settlement which has been both his cradle and performing arena. It is his tribute and homage to the brief hour of glory when, in the shadow of the empire, he so dutifully filled the dual role of cook-cup bearer, menial-cum-comprador. There is a gleam in the *bhadralok*'s eye every time the nineteenth century is mentioned: that was the only time his instinctive talents came to the fullest bloom. The tri-centenary celebrations therefore assume the pattern of both a commemoration and a wake. This double-billing deserved to be widely publicized. But with the exchequer empty and long dissociation from effective power, the celebrations turn into a

caricature of what they could have been. The confused Bengali continues to be unable to locate the point where serfdom ends and insurrection takes over. As long as the *bhadralok* is not displaced, the confusion is unlikely to dissolve on its own. So Calcutta is in a stew. It would have been in a stew even without the three hundred years of non-distinguished history to tackle. In its beginning, however, was its end.

OCTOBER, 1989

## SOME CIVILIZATION

The American President has it all taped out. He places the total cost of the war at 66 billion dollars, of which as much as 51 billion will be jointly borne by the governments of Japan, Germany, Saudi Arabia and the defunct regime of Kuwait, mostly by the last two. What the Arab sheikhs will fork out will, of course, be what they will extract from their people. It is in a sense imperialism carried to logical perfection: the war is intended to maintain Western hegemony over the Arab people, and it is the latter who will be forced to meet the expenses of the war too. The residual cost the US citizens will have to shell out, George Bush beamingly assured his people, is only around 15 billion dollars, which is peanuts, rendering the present hostilities into one of the cheapest wars in American history. What could be better?

Yes, something could be: the prospects following the cessation of the war. In the manner of Vietnam, Kuwait too would need to be destroyed in order that it might be saved. But then, the destroyed land has to be rebuilt, and none can do that better than the destroyers themselves: they have the high-tech to render everything into smithereens, they also have the know-how for full-fledged reconstruction. There is thus a gleam in everyone's eye; a golden opportunity lies in wait to further mulct the Arab people. The Western powers will be kind enough to destroy their lands and those whose lands are destroyed will be

made to pay the cost of destruction. But the Western powers will be equally kind enough to engage in the reconstruction of the prostrate, devastated lands, for which the victims of devastation will have to fork out money a second time round. Destruction - or to call it by its more updated name, de-construction - costs resources, as does reconstruction. The conquered, subjugated people will be called upon to arrange for the money for both.

The opportunities, as currently assessed, are so tempting that a scramble is already on among contractors and engineers hailing from different Western countries. They have not the least doubt that whatever the temporary difficulties, that beast, Saddam, is bound to receive his just reward, and Kuwait and its oil will be regained for the West. Kuwait will then have to be rebuilt. Sixty-six billion dollars to destroy it, and roughly sixty billion dollars, so the estimate goes, to reconstruct the country. Both activities in effect illustrate crucial aspects of demand management under global capitalism. Would we be far wrong to claim that the Marxian prognoses are coming true, notwithstanding Mikhail Gorbachev? Recessionary trends were already strongly evident in the United States in recent years; despite the huffing and puffing of Margaret Thatcher and her likes, the economy of countries like the United Kingdom had never really got going; millions had continued to be unemployed in Britain, France and West Germany. The Iraqi War has opened up fresh vistas of capitalist profit-making. The act of destruction of Arab people and Arab lands generates a demand for weaponry, and in turn stirs up the output of material and goods. The subsequent act of reconstruction will hopefully also do the same. Dig a hole, Maynard Keynes had said, and fill it up: that is the art of saving capitalism. Or fighting a war, Marx had said another 75 years ago, only that it was not with him a prescription for capitalist survival, but surmise of a strategy the capitalists would be forced to adopt. Besides, such tinkering, according to him, would still fail to save the system for long. Be that as it may, the

guardian angels of capitalism have not been able to improve upon what Marx had predicted. The Iraqi War is therefore classical capitalism: create demand through destruction, follow it up by creating demand, a second time, through activities which would pass as reconstruction.

The land battle is not yet quite joined; there is, however, already feverish excitement. Each Western national wants to have a share of the reconstruction pie. Calculations are taking place at a furious pace. Replacing pillaged equipment itself would cost an estimated 40 billion dollars, and the cost of other kinds of rebuilding at least another 25 billion, which could be, touch wood, pushed up once again to 40 billion, depending on the extent of destruction. A group of planners, oil company officials, health care experts and others have banded together in the United States to co-ordinate the various reconstruction plans. Competition for winning the contracts is likely to be intense. Signs are visible that international consultancy groups are not allowing any grass to grow under their feet. They are busy forming global alliances, in order that they might get, as the saying goes, a slice of the action. It is going to be a boondoggle to end all boondoggles. As one eager beaver explained, 'the whole world is chasing it'. John Major, the UK Prime Minister, has discussed the reconstruction plans with the Kuwaiti Government in exile; allied states participating in the shooting, he has forcefully argued, should gain first consideration in the rebuilding contracts. The British Department of Trade and Industry and the Committee for Middle East Trade have set up a liaison committee to ensure that their firms gain access to construction and repair work.

The whole world watches with bated breath as Western capitalism sets to work. Siva is the destroyer. In his other incarnation, Brahma, he is the creator as well. In both roles, he mulcts the subjugated peoples. He is also known to selectively spread the bounty. India has for instance, been informed that

should her government continue to behave, that is, continue to refuel the American planes and export the gunny bags ordered for Saudi Arabia, she too would be allowed to partake of the fruits of Kuwaiti reconstruction.

A Brahmaesque twin role apart, the War has also laid bare what Western civilization can offer. As the weeks have unfolded, the world has been allowed the chance to glimpse the pinnacles of glory and sophistication this civilization has succeeded to climb. First, the expostulations of the elected president of the leading nation in the capitalist ranks. His country has the most money and the most weaponry invested in the war; his word is therefore law. George Bush cannot wait to see Saddam Hussein dead; he would like to think that somehow, some way, that would happen: 'Would I mourn if somehow Saddam Hussein did not remain as head of the country? There will be no sorrow if he is not there.' Mind you, it is not Saddam Hussein who has organized 70,000 and odd sorties over Iraq and Kuwait, or ordered the mutilation and killing of at least a couple of thousand civilians in these lands, or arranged for the singeing of hundreds of innocent children, or rendered homeless millions of ordinary people. It would be outrageous though if an honest Arab were to wish that George Bush was dead. That would be barbaric, as behoves oriental brutes.

More examples of what civilization is are forthcoming. US Defence Secretary Richard Cheney and the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff Colin Powell, during their recent visit of Saudi Arabia, inscribed a bomb to Saddam Hussein and posed jointly for the television cameras with the replica of the bomb. Some American soldiers are apparently carrying death cards – the ace of spades – to put on the bodies of the Iraqis they kill. Hames Alexander (24), from Atlanta, Georgia, has five aces of spades in his helmet. They are for work. 'I am a killer. We are supposed to tuck them behind their ears,' he said. Another platoon also uses the ace of spades as a calling card to be placed

on dead Iraqis. This card also has a slogan: 'Died like the pig you are'. What can be done about it, in case you are an Arab, you are by definition a pig. Such are the lessons dispensed by Western civilization.

This civilization, besides, does not believe in not pulling out all the stops either. Seventy thousand air sorties have already taken place in the weeks since the War began, a magnificent piece of symphony to rain death and destruction on the Arab peoples. The American raiders, however, have to be put in the proper frame of mind so that these sorties turn out to be the grandest success; the raiders must be keyed up for action. To ensure that that really happens, they are entertained with a couple of hours of pornographic film immediately before they take off; nothing like a 'hard-on' to put them in a proper frame of mind to raze ancient Mesopotamia to the ground.

Squeamishness will not do. The United Nations Resolution 678, which the Soviet Union chose to support and on which China chose to play hooky, has to be implemented; the American troops, marines and air men, charged with the responsibility, deserve to be adequately motivated. They must be inspired enough to save the world for civilization. Inspiration can emerge from different sources. Thus Private Christopher Bolnar used to carry a pair of his girlfriend's perfumed crotchless panties in his helmet. He has just sent them back. 'It was just too much', he is reported to have said. The patriotic Americans at the same time must also learn to hate, and look down upon their enemy. Which is why there is processing of reams and reams of toilet paper embossed with the representation of Saddam Hussein's face.

It is a little too much, some of us may say. But, then, the cost has to be weighed against the benefit, the United States is the richest nation on earth, and without its support we will be bankrupt. The perfumed crotchless panties notwithstanding, or perhaps precisely on account of them, the ruling coterie in New

Delhi has issued explicit instructions to grant refuelling rights to American war planes and dispatch sand bags to Saudi Arabia. It is a wonderful feeling, to kowtow to imperialism, help it to put the shackles on other hapless peoples, and learn from the colonial powers the basics of culture and civilization. Any residual frustrations will be duly addressed. For example, a collaboration agreement will soon be signed and an American firm will be granted the franchise to manufacture crotchless panties in this country with an annual rated capacity of twenty million panties.

FEBRUARY, 1991

### THE DISTANT CENTRE

Obviously, that moribund body, the National Integration Council, has its uses. It helps to create the illusion of sage political heads counselling together on issues of the acutest national concern. At the least, it offers the union government a way out of sticky situations. No procedures have been laid down with respect to the sittings of the council. It meets and does not meet according to the whims of New Delhi's rulers. As in the case of the National Development Council, the format of the NIC congregations too is such that no opportunity arises to discuss problems at any depth. Leaders of political parties, assembled chief ministers and members of the union cabinet read out prepared texts; stated positions are restated; a doctored press note, crammed with optimistic banalities, emerges at the end of the day.

And yet, these jamborees serve one important short-term-purpose. The recognized opposition parties are tickled no end that the government has been forced to consult with them. It suits the government equally well; a kind of consensus, it can claim, has been reached among the political leaders cutting across party lines, striking a blow for national integration. None dares to vote in the United States against virtues attributable to mother-hood and the apple pie. Such are also the dominant sentiments in and around New Delhi on the preambles governing the functioning of the National Integration Council.

The cliché-filled resolutions face no resistance, and the council adjourns amidst a thick fog of smugness and complacency.

On stay occasions, the council can even play a rescue act for the opposition. Take for instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party. Having succeeded in capturing power in the most important state in the country, it would not like to fall prey to circumstances where its gains suddenly disappear. It would be actually pleased if a hastily convened meeting of the National Integration Council were to delimit the ambit of a state government's powers in matters affecting the disposal of real estate presenting it with a respectable alibi for not doing anything more spectacular in the vicinity of the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi than clearing away some shrubbery and rubble. The party would make a pretence of indignation with the agenda set up for the ensuing meeting of the council; it would place on record its disapproval of the 'consensus' resolution likely to be adopted at the meeting. This time it would have the pretext it badly wanted to rein in the wilder enthusiasts of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

Each established political party including the BJP is, after all, a firm believer in the Leninist doctrine of onestep-backward-two-step-forward. The message therefore gets transmitted all along the line: while the policy of the principle is the best policy, the policy of the principle itself suggests that the party must not encourage a situation of turmoil in Uttar Pradesh; that would go against the long-range interests of the Hindu kingdom that is coming. In view of the resolution of the National Integration Council, the party is not in a position to face a confrontation on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue: the cadres and followers must appreciate this and steel themselves for the bigger battles ahead.

The irony ought not to escape the eye. It is the Left political parties which, in a Pavlovian fixation, keep insisting that the National Integration Council be convened to discuss, sequentially or together, Babri Masjid, Punjab, Kashmir and

other sundry issues threatening to disintegrate the nation. The biggest beneficiaries from these meetings are however the parties and groups whose sustenance depends on fomenting animosities between religious, caste, linguistic and ethnic groups in the country. Irrespective of the National Integration Council resolutions on Punjab, the traditional divide remains; the Akalis, the BJP, the Janata Dal, and perhaps even the CPI, are for immediate elections in the state, the Congress(I) and the CPI(M) for their postponement. Beyond presenting a forum for re-stressing the old positions, future session of the National Integration Council would have little to offer in the way of suggestions how to re-integrate Punjab, or Kashmir or, for that matter, Assam and the north-east with the rest of the nation. Expression of sentiments on the desirability of political initiatives alongside appropriate law and order measures would be unanimous. The consensus would disappear the moment the contents of any fresh initiative begin to be discussed. Nor would there be much interest shown in listening to the point of view that what is going on in the name of enforcement of law and order in Punjab, Kashmir or Assam, renders the possibility of a political rapprochement more remote with each passing day. About everything has been stylized; even Simranjit Singh Mann's latest statement, aligning himself firmly with the demand for a politically sovereign Khalistan, existing outside the Republic of India, hardly causes a ripple.

None of the established political parties, including, quite candidly, those belonging to the left, comprehend the nature of the principal malady afflicting the Union of India. The Constitution, drafted for the fledgling nation at about the time the British were departing, is shot with anomalies; it talks of a union of states, but it in fact unfolds an arrangement whereby the union is enabled to throttle the constituent states. It could not be otherwise, since the more substantive parts of the Constitution were dutifully lifted from the Government of India

Act 1935. It has the façade of a democratic formulation, but its interior design reflects imperial *hauteur*. The nation, it assumes, is already integrated, whereas it should have been one of its essential tasks to assure, by what it says and the manner its preambles are applied, the heterogeneous groups residing within the political boundary delineating India that they do indeed belong to one nation, they do so irrespective of their diversities, each group's rights and prerogatives are equally sacrosanct.

The hypothesis had to be established, but this essential point was missed. To those who came to power in New Delhi, the premise was already the conclusion. The central administration has so gone about in the past forty-odd years as to convince all and sundry that the union of India is fiction, those goody-goody articles of the Constitution are only a figleaf. It has turned out to be similar to the curate's egg of folklore. Its over-centralized, over-authoritarian provision, exemplified by articles 256 and 356, have transmitted the crucial message to the far-flung parts of the country: national integration could only be on terms approved by the distant centre. It is a monetized economy, and the Constitution has, whether or not with malice aforethought, stacked the major financial and monetary powers with New Delhi. The taste of blood makes a carnivore even more blood-thirsty; having got used to the enjoyment of power through the decades, the centre, whenever it has encountered any constitutional difficulty in getting what it wanted, has moved fast to change the obstructing articles of the Constitution.

It is only at the end of four and a half decades that it is being realized that there have been problems en route, and the hour is late. The all-powerful centre is suddenly finding itself bereft of power. It still deploys, in the usual manner, the army and the para-military elements in the so-called disturbed area, but there is a certain half-heartedness even here, as if it has only a compartmental brief, and merely watches the situation in Punjab, Kashmir, the north-east and Andhra Pradesh. The inertia

persists. The significance of the developments in the various parts of the country has not percolated to the extent it should have. The centre's waywardness, which is at the root of the problem, is yet to be arrested. Two recent examples, both from the north-east, ought to suffice.

Like the prime minister, the finance minister too was not a member of either house of parliament when he was inducted in the union cabinet in the last week of June. The six-month stipulation was there; he had to be returned either to the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha from somewhere within that period. He did not have the ghost of a chance of being elected from his native Punjab. In any case, despite periodic utterances of union cabinet ministers and the state governor, and despite resolutions of the National Integration Council, no elections are on the anvil in that state. The Congress(I) party could have tried to get the finance minister returned from New Delhi in the ensuing by-election; the nation's capital, after all, is an extension of the Punjab plains. The risk was not taken. Instead, docile Congressmen in the Assam legislative assembly were directed to elect the finance minister to the Rajya Sabha from a vacancy pending in that state. The finance minister is now a member of the Rajya Sabha on the strength of the assumption that he is a permanent resident of Assam, and this notwithstanding the fact that the aggregate duration of his stay in the state, after account is taken of his assorted visits in this or that connection, would barely exceed a month. What has been done is of course against the spirit of the Constitution and the provisions of the Representation of the People's Act. The consequences of the folly could be far-reaching. The minister is, as the American expression goes, a carpet-bagger, whom the dictionary demurely defines as 'a person from one area who tries to take an active part in the political life of another area'. This is about the politest description of an individual with this background; the actual history in the United States is more non-demure. Once the civil

war ended and the south lay prostrate in defeat, hordes of adventurers from the north descended and indulged in an extended spell of freebooting. The Rajya Sabha seat annexed by the finance minister is also a crass instance of free-booting. It is presumably beyond the capability of the political masters operating in New Delhi to assess the damage this kind of behaviour does to the long-term cause of national integration.

Consider the putrid drama of easing out the MUPP ministry in Meghalaya. Defying the Supreme Court, the speaker arbitrarily disallows the votes cast by four MLAs in support of the motion of confidence in the incumbent ministry. There is a tie when the counting is done on the basis of the exclusion. The convention is for the speaker to vote with the treasury benches when situation of this nature arise; the speaker does precisely the reverse and declares the ministry to have lost the vote; the governor, obviously under instructions from the central cabinet recommends president's rule; the president, again abiding by the wishes of the union council of ministers, signs on the dotted line. We are very much back in the Indira Gandhi era.

The story would not perhaps quite end here. Since its directives have been flouted, the Supreme Court still has the matter; there is every prospect of a judiciary versus legislature controversy manifesting itself. Such super-structural stirrings, and the final resting points they arrive at, have nonetheless little relevance to happenings at the base. The Congress(I) leadership in New Delhi feels satisfied as it has witnessed the demise of a non-Congress(I) administration in yet another state. In Shillong, the perception is qualitatively different: the rules of 'India' do not even bother about pronouncements of their own judiciary where their 'imperial' interests are involved; there is in other words, no moral basis to the union of India, so why bother not to do nasty things to it, or why not opt out of it altogether?

The government and the political parties shuffling about in the nation's capital are reluctant to come face to face with reality.

Such issues as the finance minister's usurping of the Rajya Sabha seat constitutionally belonging to a citizen of Assam and the dismissal of the MUPP government in Meghalaya will, rest assured, not be placed on the agenda of the National Integration Council. Nor will the agenda be allowed to be contaminated by themes such as what devaluation and runaway prices do to the spirit of national integrity, when the sheer physical survival of the nation's majority is rendered into an open question. Finally, how will those that constitute the National Integration Council react to the suggestion that the manner the Ministry of Finance has been functioning of late is itself a major threat to national integration? For there might be many citizens genuinely ashamed to be a part of a nation whose finance minister deems it his duty to call a press conference on foreign soil and announces important policy decision, without leave of the nation's parliament and without the formal concurrence of the union council of ministers too, because his true masters, the international financial institutions, have instructed him to do so. A nation systematically led to dishonour by its rulers, some could conclude, is not worth being integrated.

NOVEMBER, 1991

## NO RADICAL CRAP, WE ARE INDIANS

Watching, on the television screen, Mario Cuomo thundering away at the Democratic Party convention at Madison City Garden, New York City, was part nostalgia and part revelation. Cuomo, the governor of the state of New York, was nominating Bill Clinton, Governor of Arkansas, as the party's presidential candidate for the elections next November. The charade was a formality, since Clinton had already clinched the nomination through the string of victories he scored in the long, ragged primaries. It has still to be gone through. Since the New York State Party was hosting the convention, Clinton still thought it wise to request Cuomo to give the nominating speech. Although belonging to the same party, their ideological positions are somewhat apart. Cuomo, a vastly more experienced politician than the presidential candidate himself, and with a popular base Clinton can yet only dream of, graciously accepted the invitation. Clinton's only hope of riding to victory in New York is by hanging on to Cuomo's coat-tails. Clinton knows that, as does Cuomo. Whatever the New York Governor's private views on the Arkansas Governor, this is election season, and there has to be a façade of unity. Besides, the incumbent president, George Bush, is no longer what is called 'a dead cert' to win the presidency a second time on behalf of the rival Republican Party. After twelve long years, the democrats are in with a

chance. The recession nagging the economy has begun to hurt, and not just the black people. The unemployment rate is steadily mounting, low interest rates tried out by the Federal Reserve Board are not proving enough to revive either economic activity or jobs. The euphoria caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, and the victory over that pest, Saddam Hussein, has lost much of the gilt. In millions of ordinary American homes, discontent is seething and swirling. The days of the 'uppie' generation are seemingly over. The supply side is once more suspect. The Republicans, no question, are in trouble.

Mario Cuomo sensed it. It was time, he decided, to return to the rhetoric of the thirties and the forties, time to marry that rhetoric with recollection of the glamour and excitement of the sixties. The economic conditions in the country of course are not as bad as in the early 1930s, nor is Bill Clinton a Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Clinton is no Jack or Bob Kennedy either. He is hardly handsome in the Kennedy mould, but at least he has Jack's hair style and Jack's ready smile. The appellation poor-man's Jack-Kennedy will do for him for the present. That, Cuomo had the gut feeling, was not sufficient. The support of rich Jewish bankers in New York City notwithstanding, the Democratic Party continues to be regarded, on the relative scale, as the party of the poor, the party linked to the coalition FDR put together: the blacks from the south, but also the country oligarchs from there, the white and blue collar workers in plants and factories north, east and west, and huge numbers unemployed here, there, everywhere, topped by a sprinkling of standard-bearers of radical thought. In the course of the post-war forty-odd years which have borne the ravages of both Korea and Vietnam, to this coalition have been added anti-war groups, women's liberationists, and some gay campaigners as well. For four of the last presidential elections, this menagerie did not click; the Democratic Party went down with a heavy defeat.

However, with the economy failing to recover and joblessness mounting, this year could be different. So why not try?

Cuomo chose to try. The rhetoric flowing effortlessly from his larynx was vintage New Deal. There were repeated references to the plight of the unemployed and the homeless to the unconscionable bilking of the poor by the rich, to the republican culture of free enterprise only for the few at the top, to the manner the privileged ones walk away with opportunities thrown up by society while the hitherto deprived continue to twiddle their thumbs. Cuomo roared. He mentioned the record fiscal deficit in the federal budget, but from which the unemployed gained little, he touched the raw nerve of chauvinism by wondering why, instead of selling wares to Japan and Europe as in the past, the United States is now reduced to buying goods, indiscriminately, from overseas. Opportunities for jobs, American boys and girls could have availed of are thereby gifted away to foreign labour, thus rendering the world's richest nation into the world's largest debtor and experiencing the largest balance of payments gap in history. The Republicans, the party of the rich, Cuomo complained, however, remains unfazed. That party is dominated by arch reactionaries and vested interests. Its principal pastime is to use the paraphernalia of the federal government for perpetrating countless shenanigans. The Republicans keep protesting that the magic wand waved by the invisible hand in the expanse of the free market will cure America of all its ills. No such luck; the invisible hand adds, very visibly, to the pile of the privileged, while hundreds of thousands remain without jobs. The Republicans could not care less; they believe in institutionalized thievery. They have been responsible for the greatest bank robbery in the annals of the great United States of America, meaning the scandal engulfing scores of loans – and savings banks which have gone to the wall because their funds were siphoned away by crooked Republican Party functionaries who had infiltrated into the boards of directors of

these banks; even scandal. Several banks had to close; employees were thrown to the wolves and depositors lost their entire savings, the wretched supply side economics was ruining the nation; only the chosen few amongst the Republicans were having a gala time. But this year the tide is going to turn, the poor will be avenged, power will come to the powerless.

Much of the rhetoric has a familiar ring to the Indian ear. The phraseology of Cuomo's polemics could as well have served against the ruling party over here. Cuomo referred to the 'thievery' on the part of the Republican leadership and their 'incompetence'. The accusations could have been hurled with equal relevance against some of our local pretenders. As for qualifying for the appellation of 'the greatest bank robbery in history', it could end up as a toss-up between the two nations: the Americans have their loans and savings banks catastrophe, we have the banks-stock market scam. If some Americans claim to be victims of the skullduggery supply-side economics allegedly is, why, most Indians, it will be suggested, are reeling under the impact of attack from the same source.

It is, however, not just the coincidence, within the prism of different scales, in economic circumstances of the two countries that is noteworthy. More impressive – and more agonizing – is the sleekness with which the traditional ruling party over here, the Indian National Congress, has switched its American side. For solid historical reasons, the sympathy of international-minded Indian citizens was in the past with the Democratic Party in the United States. It is the party of Woodrow Wilson, the idealist, who gave the world the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations. It is the party of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who wrote that famous letter to Winston Churchill during the Second World War: there was no ambiguity in that letter, no reservation on the part of Roosevelt on account of the fact that he was intruding into other people's affairs. The fight for democracy, and against fascism and Nazism, the US

President asserted, would be worth a great deal more if the people of the great subcontinent of India were allowed the right of self-governance. It was the Democrats, led by Roosevelt, who masterminded the New Deal, quintessence of the romantic notion that the State is not a heartless, soulless, ossified organism, it has an active role to play in the elimination of unemployment distress and iniquity from society. It was Roosevelt who propagated the message of public works as cure for joblessness; he and his party talked of the demand side, of creating purchasing power which could revive the demand for goods and thus usher in the pulsation of life in fields and factories. Did not we Indians build our multipurpose river valley projects after the fashion of the great Tennessee Valley Authority, which FDR conceived and his faithful camp follower, David Lilienthal, executed? Yes, FDR had some little local difficulty with the racialist Southern gentry, but in course of time the Democratic Party took care of that. Remember the great Civil Rights Movement some thirty years ago, remember how John Kennedy sent the federal guards to Alabama so that a black student could have his entry into the hitherto segregated State University, remember how that bigot of a governor, George Wallace, finally caved in? Remember how Bob Kennedy and Martin Luther King's widow marched together, silently but resolutely, at the funeral procession of the martyred hero, who received his inspiration from our own Mahatma Gandhi?

Much of these instances from history was perhaps flummery, what Americans call 'show biz'. There was still a hard core of sincerity, a feeling of communion of the spirit, a fusion, if not of ideology, at least of ideals. The Indian middle class, amorphous like all middle classes, was never a homogeneous entity. It had, nonetheless, a collage of sentiments and convictions it shared with the Democratic Party; whether those convictions were always acted upon is a different matter. Within the precincts of the Indian National Congress, those beliefs,

howsoever abstract, were not dissimilar from the invocations chanted in the thirties and later by the Democratic Party. There was a convergence of language. There was also a free borrowing on a selective basis, from the Democratic Party programme by the Indian National Congress in the immediate post-independence years.

In that phase, our political leadership, flush with the glow of newly acquired freedom, thought it routine to consider themselves at par with leaders of parties and political movements overseas. The Democratic Party was admired, but admired from a pedestal of equal altitude. The Americans had the Roosevelt couple, Franklin Delano and Eleanor. We had Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the respect had to be mutual. It was in fact so. This mutuality of regard was supplemented by a shared perception on the government's role in a democratic society: the government is not evil, it is an active force which takes care of the poor and the weak, it has an obligation to check the depredations which the roaming, roving invisible hand in the market place could be culpable of.

The Democratic Party has not, basically, changed much since that time. It remains a hotchpotch, radicals jostling against southern conservatives, the black, increasingly more conscious of their power and the privileges – that are yet denied to them, – still trying to reach an equilibrium of understanding with those others in the party who think it prudent to hasten slowly on account of the hard reality of the electoral arithmetic: sizeable sections of the white citizenry are still enmeshed in prejudice, but, without their votes, there can be no return to power, and therefore no prospect of rekindling government activism to speed up reforms which could make the black and the Hispanics and the original ethnic tribes full and equal citizens in every respect. The Party, because its leaders got sucked into Vietnam, swung, a quarter of a century ago, sharply to the right its attitude towards international relations. However, its

pro-poor, pro-interventionist domestic policy has remained more or less unimpaired through the decades. Democratic Senators and Congressmen, some cynics feel free with their comments, are for active government intervention because that is how one protects the 'pork barrel'. That cannot be the only, or even major, part of the story; the Republican legislators love the pork barrel no less.

The United States has not changed much, nor has its Democratic Party. It is bourgeois territory par excellence, and the boundary conditions governing its thoughts and actions cannot be easily breached. Within that limitation, the party still champions the cause of the deprived and the under-privileged, both categories relevantly defined. Its lack of faith in supply-side economics is not merely doctrinal, but based on the hard crust of experience. No, the Democratic Party in its essence remains the same, it is its supposed counterpart, the Indian National Congress, and the government the latter runs, which have changed beyond description. A party of fierce nationalists has been transformed into a party of compradors.

All credit to him, the credit for effecting this stupendous qualitative change belongs to Nehru's grandson who was leader of the party and the country's prime minister in the second half of the eighties. Confronted by a no-win situation, even George Bush has been forced to climb down, in recent months, on several fronts; social security could not be skimmed beyond a point; abortion could not be prohibited all the way for all women; the dear money policy had to be abandoned at the insistence of the more pragmatic chairman of the Federal Reserve Board; some direct taxes had to be introduced, and government outlay could not be cut back indiscriminately. Supply-side economy, in fact, it never was.

We, on the other hand are different. Our rulers, still from the Indian National Congress, have gone the whole hog to embrace supply-side economics. They and their party have

succeeded in re-moulding the Indian middle-class ethos too. George Bush should not worry. If his re-election is in some jeopardy, he should use his emergency powers to admit to citizenship the reportedly two million Indian applicants waiting, for year on end, with patience and fortitude, for this tryst with destiny. They will vote solidly for the Republican ticket. Please, no radical crap, we are Indians.

AUGUST, 1992

## NOW A WAY OF LIFE

The Andhra Pradesh chief minister, that is, the one who has just been sacked, was using his public office for private purposes. But, let there be no misunderstanding, his going was not because he was deeply engaged in such malfeasance. The malfeasance was public knowledge for quite some while; its details had been widely publicized in the newspapers, the press reports, including lurid, meticulous details of his misdoings, went un-contradicted for weeks on end. The prime minister would be a hypocrite of the first water if he were to claim that those happenings in his home state were not known to him. The chief minister did not have to depart because he was corrupt. He had to go because the High Court judgement was couched in such explicit terms that to retain him as chief minister would, it was so concluded, have an adverse consequence on the fortunes of the ruling party. To be corrupt is no longer considered a disqualification by itself; even public knowledge of someone being corrupt need not inconvenience the person; he could carry on as if nothing were the matter. Only if circumstances so arrange that a particular act of corruption, or a particular set of acts of corruption, does more harm than good to the party's cause that the individual concerned has to be eased out.

The manner in which the now deposed Andhra Pradesh chief minister had chosen to conduct himself bore the mark of transparency. Everything was, one can very nearly admit, open

and above board. The malfeasances the Karnataka chief minister and his celebrated chief secretary are involved in are equally diaphanous. The prime minister cannot pretend to be ignorant of the affairs in Karnataka either. He cannot also pretend that he did not know that the Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka chief ministers, both of them, went ahead with their decision to accord permission to a dozen or more of private medical, dental or engineering colleges, which were intended to subsist and prosper on the basis of capitation fees, *after* the Supreme Court had declared acceptance of such fees as *ultra vires* of the Constitution. Even so, one goes, the other stays. To ease out the Karnataka chief minister, close on the heels of the dismissal of the Andhra Pradesh chief minister, would have sent the wrong signal to the other Congress(I) chief ministers. The desideratum is not to weed out corruption from the system, but, not to make the other chief ministers nervous. The mask of Solomon, which the prime minister flaunts, is therefore a bit of a sham. Corruption has emerged as the principal staple of the nation. If the state-of-the-art jargon is to be used, the entire republic has been transformed into one gigantic scam. And the criterion just referred to, on the basis of which prime ministerial decisions are reportedly reached, need not be the only one either. Both chief ministers are equally corrupt; party interests, however, demand that both must not be dispensed with at the same time; one of the two had to be kept back for the sake of party morale. The reason underlying the decision which one to go and which one to continue is again public knowledge: the survivor has the protection of the prime minister's pet godman, or, to put it more correctly and precisely, of the godman of whose the prime minister is the pet. The other chief minister is the pet. The other chief minister was not in such luck. It is as simple as that.

A handful of brokers, and a bunch of politicians who used to operate through this handful of brokers, have made a neat pile by bilking the banks and manipulating the share market. The

media attention continues to rivet on the bits and pieces of the grand swindle. The Joint Parliamentary Committee, brimful of righteous self-importance, is grilling petty and not-so-petty officials of the banks that happened to be embroiled in the fascinating operations. The committee, for whatever reason, does not want to leave the safe ground of superficialities, such as whether it was the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India or someone somewhere else who was the first one to get scent of the ongoing misdoings. The committee has seemingly no interest in encroaching into more fruit-bearing arenas. The brokers played god, for some enchanting months, to the banks and the stock exchanges. They were permitted to play god. No question is being addressed to the issue how they came to gather such clout. Brokers are intermediaries; they act on behalf of buyers and sellers. The Harshed Mehtas and the Bhupen Dalals made their pile, but those on whose behalf they acted it stands to reason, must have made an equal or a greater pile. These principals were instrumental in ensuring that the banks act as putty clay in the hands of the middlemen. The principals, again it stands to reason, must be politically powerful, and to an extraordinary extent. Their names are not mentioned in the newspapers, or mentioned only in innuendoes. Which suggests that they are resourceful enough to have arranged to have their flanks covered. That does not, however, imply that they are any less corrupt than the state chief minister who has gone or, for the matter, the state chief minister who continues to survive.

Or consider the other swindle, the size and ramifications of which could even put into shade the scandal over banks and securities. The finance minister was hell bent to raise at least Rs. 3,000 crore of additional resource by jacking up the price of petroleum products; the comprador minister had to do so before he landed at Dulles International Airport, DC; the fiscal gap had to be narrowed, otherwise the masters would be very cross with him. The countrymen were thereby taken for a huge ride; it was

confidence trick of an astounding order. For if it were a matter of securing an extra three thousand crore of rupees for augmenting the public kitty, the minister could have easily laid his hands on the amount and many times more by selling the first lot of shares of public undertakings at prices which the market was willing to bear. Such shares have been sold, but at throwaway prices. The plea that these shares were not listed with the stock exchanges and no market quotations were available for them will not wash; all one needed to do was to take the ratio of the historical cost of the assets of such undertakings with their current valuation done by a competent certified accountant; that would have provided a rough notion of a fair opening price. Such accountancy could not, however, have served the ends of corruption. The transactions therefore assumed the form of a private picnic: the shares-to-be-sold were handed over to the custody of mutual funds managed, once more, by the banks; the banks called in their pet brokers; the brokers quietly called in their pet customers; bonhomie did as bonhomie is supposed to do. A SAIL scrip, which could have been disposed of, were there free bidding in the market, at no less than Rs 450, was sold off, please do not laugh, at Rs 15. The story is not much different for the scrips of BHEL and similar other more alluring public enterprises. The government is coy, it will not tell the docile Indian public now many thousands of crore of rupees were lost to the national exchequer because of this great exercise in disinvestments. The finance minister cannot dare say that he did not know what was taking place; if he did not know, he has no business to stay on as finance minister. No, he must have been fully aware of the shenanigan that was on, shenanigan defined as allowing private gains at the public's expense. To be a politician in power and not to connive in shady doings is an indefensible stance to adopt; if you want to continue as a power-wielding politician, you have to connive with assorted acts of corruption. Whether you have individually received a part of the kickback

commission or *nazrana* is beside the point. You are an integral part of the system. Hands are put in the public till before your very watchful eyes; you do not protest. Your role is that of the inert, indolent guards in Rembrandt's *Nachtwacht*, you watch, but you are not supposed to catch the thieves. The role is unlikely to change with the impending sale of the second lot of shares, supposed to take place via public auction. Auctions of this nature, which exclude the ordinary householder, are about as 'public' as the public schools in Britain.

Such then has been the great Indian transition. Over the years, this nation, assuming it is one, has lost the faculty to distinguish right from wrong. The process starts with relatively little things, such as for instance, bending a particular provision of the Constitution and the injunctions of the Representation of the People Act. You must be, the statutes say, a habitual resident of a state if you want to be elected to the Rajya Sabha by the members of the Vidhan Sabha of that particular state. Exigencies are all, thus a Bengali from Calcutta, who had never before set his foot in Gujarat, rents a hovel in Navsari, claims himself to be a permanent resident in the state, gets elected to the Rajya Sabha by the members of the legislative assembly at Gandhinagar, and in due course becomes a cabinet minister. Or someone from Punjab, who, for fear of the militants, cannot show his face in that hapless state, buys half a chhatak of farm land in Assam; who can now prevent him from being elected to the Rajya Sabha from that state and, once more, occupying a key slot in the union council of ministers? Nitpicking of the sort the preceding lines exemplify will make the ministers concerned, or their cronies, hopping mad. What is the point, it will be asked, of making such unkind insinuations when what is involved is only a minor technicality?

That is really hitting it on the nail. We are a great informal nation, we do not like to be prisoners of technicalities. The trumpet has been sounded, the invocation is on to serve the

nation as a cabinet minister, is it not silly if the splendid mission one has been invited to participate in is to be botched because of a mere technical aberration, the tryst with destiny cannot be allowed to be frustrated because of this or that irritant of a rule. So the advice is to circumvent it. That is one of the early instructions to absorb in the game that has got to be known as learning the ropes. Once one starts with the acquisition of such knowledge, there is no looking back.

The latest developments suggest a certain maturing of the nation. Corruption, a recent debate in Calcutta lazily, complacently, almost happily, agreed, is a way of life. One does not confront, or engage in battle with, a way of life; one gets adjusted to it. The noble Indian attribute the ancient scriptures used to praise to the sky is precisely this: whatever the circumstances, one must not allow oneself to be emotionally disturbed, one must practise impassiveness. If people call you a thief or a crook to your face, be impassive. If you in fact indulge in thievery, even then, stay impassive, however heavy the barrage of public criticism. Even were you to be caught in the very act of thievery, it would be foolish on your part to lose your cool. The storm, rest assured, will pass. People will, over time, themselves learn to be inured, will come to terms, in course of time, with the basic reality: corruption is a fact of life more so since the politicians are model-setters in this country, the general public will hopefully, themselves cross over to corruption. This great experiment with truth has already commenced. Indian hedonism and Fund Bank philosophy, it is being discovered, are made for each other. You steal, I steal, they steal; my minister steals I do too, praise me, what a model citizen I am. Such stealing and thieving and profiteering, the Fund-Bank philosophy asserts, reflect market reality, they equilibrate demand with supply, thereby serving a tremendous social function.

There is only one minor snafu. A nation corrupt to the core is unlikely to go very far. For scientists and technologists and

accountants will also have to turn cooks if they have to survive in this ambience. And once they too begin to cut corners, the edifice of the state would be in danger of collapsing; all calculations and projections, including the engineering ones, would go haywire, an all-destroying viral infection would fell the nation. It may happen on this side of the left-over twentieth century. With luck, we might have a glimpse of the twenty-first century as well. Beyond that, it would be sheer cheek to hope to survive.

OCTOBER, 1992

### NEITHER HISTORY NOR LEGALITY TO FALL BACK ON

Both here and in Pakistan, it is a government in the minority having its own compulsions. Or the nature of plurality the government enjoys in parliament is not really material, what is the attitude of mind conditioned over decades on end. At whatever cost, we will, the world has been told, keep Kashmir. It is an important statement, bursting with significance. Kashmir is acknowledged to be no part of the Indian nation. Perhaps it never was nor wanted to be. This is for the first time, however, that pretences have dispensed with. The regulation complaints are there, over the supposedly extra-hostile statements by the neighbouring country's foreign minister or over the supposed infiltration of agents from across the border. However, no more the bravura of how the people of the valley would doggedly foil the conspiracy of alien forces, no more incantations about how Kashmiri brethren, patriots all, would fight to the last drop of their blood, alongside our jawans so as to repulse the aggressors and hold aloft the banner of Indian nationhood. It is now down to the brasstacks: we will hold on to Kashmir, whatever the cost, by force of arms.

The government in Pakistan has its problems. It cannot afford not to make great play of the Indian statement, but it cannot also afford to allow the expression of outrageousness spill beyond a point. It is not prepared to have another war with India, at least at this juncture. This could be a decision reached

jointly by the civil and military authorities in that country, or the decision of the civil authority alone, or of the military brass alone. Since neither authority can quite flout the other or for that matter, flout the advice flouting across from other quarters, including from Foggy Bottom, the prospect of an outbreak of full-scale warfare between the two countries can be ruled out. Some display of strong-arm methods, those in New Delhi charged with the responsibility for Kashmir might therefore conclude, would cool off the ardour of the rampaging crowds in Srinagar streets. With the current crisis blown over; what to do with the fire next time could be worried over only when it was on. Meanwhile, notice has been served; whether the people there love us or love us not, like us or like us not, we will hold on to Kashmir, by hook or crook, the cost factor is not relevant.

We, that is to say, have decided to ride roughshod over the sovereign rights of the four million or thereabouts of the ethnic Kashmiris. To claim that there were no early warning signals and the situation suddenly descended upon us would hardly be honest. The National Conference, despite a corrupt leadership, was still a tolerable kind of buffer between the sullen Kashmiri psyche and Indian overbearingness. Those who run the Conference's affairs chose to end that role in 1987. The decision, history will presumably say, sealed not Kashmir's, but India's fate. The assembly elections that year, nearly everybody now agrees, were rigged in a most impressive manner. The Lok Sabha polls last November, in the few places they took place in the valley, were equally comprehensively manipulated; even so, not more than 3 per cent of the electorate could be shown to have condescended to vote. Call it, politely, the epoch of indifference, call it by worse names, Kashmiris have turned the other way from the Indian Union.

The Government in New Delhi, conscious of its minority status, and worried how the votes go in the impending elections in eight states and one Union Territory, has gone. On record: it

will cling to Kashmir whatever the cost. In a country of eight hundred and odd million citizens, a handful must still be around who, admonished to put their hands to their hearts, would admit at least to themselves that it is an altogether weird situation. Perhaps not even 1 per cent of the valley's population has any love left for India, the snubbings India receives in any international forum on any occasion invariably bring transports of joy to the overwhelming majority of the Kashmiris. India, to them, is unmitigated evil. Infiltrators from across the border or no infiltrators, incitement by Pakistan radio or no incitement, smuggling of AK-47 guns or no smuggling, this is the ground reality. By our pledge to keep the valley whatever the cost, we are only admitting, howsoever obliquely, the existence of this reality.

The facts could not be more glaring. Here is an ethnic-and-religious-minority consisting of four million people; they do not like to be part of our Union, but we will force them to stay with us. Our ego is involved. There are such considerations as that we have sunk in the valley, over a span of more than four score years, thousands of crores of rupees worth of resources, in the form of defence outlay and economic subsidies. We will hate to see all this money go to waste. In order that that might not happen, we are prepared to spend even more of our meagre resources. Beyond these considerations, there is perhaps also a sullenness, of the kind a husband feels when a long-suffering wife seeks a divorce. Male chauvinism must have its final fling.

We get caught in the maze of our irrationality. We are an unsullied, unsulliable democracy, the largest in the world. Our Constitution allows freedom of association and expression. It permits multiple political choices. We are besides, according to our own assertions, by both conviction and temperament, against imperialism and colonial exploitation. A terrible contradiction exists between these claims and our corny stand over Kashmir. One can of course almost predict the hasty official rejoinder: our

Constitution allows freedom of opinion and association, but it does not allow secession; no state is permitted to break away. That itself is an incongruity of a sort: a state has the right to join the Union of India, it does not have the right to walk away. Since an arrangement of this nature is not unique to India, let it pass. But, then, what about the right of revolt? A revolution does not wait for permission from the nation's Constitution – a revolution usually aims at destroying the Constitution.

Those invested with the responsibility of managing the affairs of the nation will have to encounter a couple of other difficulties too. The election manifesto on the basis of which they have won office contains a whole lot of rhetoric on the ushering in of an arcadia India marked by wholesale de-centralization of authority. Honouring the grassroots is the new catechism. The states have been promised a new aura of federalism; they will share power, they have been informed, equally with the centre. This amended philosophy is based on the apparent acceptance of a specific proposition: the Indian republic is a voluntary union of states, each state represents a distinct conglomeration of ethnic, cultural and linguistic values, these values are deserving of being accorded the highest consideration. There is a parallel point of view of late gaining tacit approval: where within a far state, small ethnic groups exist along with the dominant group, they too must find their place in the sun; they could be six hundred thousand, as in the hills of Darjeeling, or four million, as with the Bodos in Assam, they must nonetheless be assured of their full democratic rights within the portals of the Union of India. How do such sentiments go with the assertion that we hold on to Kashmir at whatever cost, period, regardless of the wishes and predilections of the people of the valley?

Should not another perception intrude at some point? We are not in a non-inter-dependent world. Only a few thousand miles away, Perestroika is writing its own logic. Estonia or Lithuania or Latvia may each have barely a million people, but,

in all these lands, ethnic nationalism is about to form into a blizzard. The story is not much different in Azerbaijan or Armenia. Also, do we forget the fact that the United Nations General Assembly has, in the course of the past two decades, conceded the right to total sovereignty to nations which consist of barely a hundred thousand people, or even less?

Neither history nor legality will, alas, support our stand on Kashmir. A government in the minority needs, up to a point, to humour along the jingoists, otherwise it is unlikely to survive. It will, for dear life, have to continue to sound belligerent.

What about those who are mercifully not in government and comprehend in full the absurdity of the situation? Why should their private views not be rendered into public ones? What about a minority of individuals who would not mind the wrath of letters written to editors of newspapers, not mind being described as traitors by the nation's former prime minister, not mind being bounced off from official committees, or boycotted from the public media? Why could not at least some of them gather together and try to tell the nation that it is incumbent for the world's largest democracy to practise, for a change, some democracy? Could not a few economists, for example, go on record that, given the magnitude of resources that would be necessary to set aside in case Kashmir is to be kept on the basis of firepower and terrorization alone, the nation's mandate, in their view, should be sought in the clearest possible terms? The people in the valley constitute less than one-half of one per cent of the nation; there ought to be a proper cost-benefit analysis before any sizeable quantity of the nation's resources is deployed to compel this tiny minority to stay within the union, when they evidently do not want to do so. A referendum in Kashmir would be permitted, the world has been informed, only over our dead bodies. What about a referendum in the country as a whole though, on the issue whether we do or do not indeed want to retain the valley *at any cost*?

## A VERSION OF SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

The judge could not have been more fair. He had, he says, little reason to contradict or contest the allegation that some members of the ruling political party were active participants in the orgy of killings and arson which took place in Delhi and its neighbourhood on 31 October 1984 and the subsequent days in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination. The judge is not one to flinch from taking cognisance of facts, which in any case are widely known. However, members of the ruling party who took part in the murder of Sikhs and the pillage and burning of houses belonging to the community, did so 'for considerations entirely their own'. Their sins – and crimes – should not be allowed to prey on their party; the party, the judge has decided, cannot be held accountable for acts perpetrated by its members.

The judge's views will without question receive wide endorsement. Ours is a secular, free society. Each citizen is permitted to follow his or her conscience and indulge in activities of his or her own choosing. While political parties exist, it will smack of absolutism to expect them to ordain and regulate the life and living of their members. True, party members are supposed to subscribe either to the general philosophy of the organization to which they belong, or, in case the latter is not burdened by the weight of any such irrelevance, to its programme of action, even if it be a single-point one, such as that the dynasty is *über alles*. As long as adherence to the party

philosophy and its programme does not come in the way of occasional frolics like murder and arson, or vice versa, both the party and its members should have little cause for complaint; it will be deemed as a gross transgression of individual liberties were the party to tell its members how they should spend their free time. And one must leave it to the judgement of the members whether some of their activities, such as arson, looting or killings, cut thwart the party's beliefs or tenets; in the final analysis, it is for the members to decide whether a situation of conflict has or has not arisen. After all, in our country, the membership of the ruling party largely consists of those whose personal philosophy is firmly grafted in the doctrine of idealism. Objects, according to this doctrine, do not exist outside the mind. Certainly in their minds the members have not experienced any discomfort while combining their membership of the ruling party with extracurricular activities of several exotic genres. Besides, doubt can be expressed whether murder and arson can any longer be described as exotic; haven't these been rendered into everyday occurrences?

The judge, in the circumstances, could hardly have reached any other judgement than what he reached: he decided to absolve the party from culpability for the grisly crimes committed by its members. It is a breakthrough of a judgement. For, by implication, it stresses a two-way non-relationship: a political party is not responsible for acts perpetrated by its members, and members in their turn have no obligation to conform to the stated aims and objects of the party. This double negation sums up altogether neatly the social reality guiding the nation in which we take pride to belong. None need be taken aback at discovering nuggets of existential wisdom in this reality: the allegiance of an individual is only to his or her own self, neither society nor party has any business to behave in the manner of a nosy parker.

The judge has been perceptive enough to appreciate the

moral dilemma which could confront a political party whenever circumstances of this nature arise. There is however an escape hatch for the party; should a nasty situation develop, it could withdraw into idealism. It has only to shut its eyes and deny the operation of phenomena outside the mind. In slightly vulgar language, this is better known as the principle of hear-no-evil-and-see-no-evil. The judge, through the comments he has offered and the conclusions he has arrived at, is revealed as an enthusiastic supporter of this particular branch of philosophy.

Great civilizations have been known to have established themselves on ground sanctified by such wondrous doctrines. Please take into account the manifold possibilities. For considerations entirely his own, an army general may betray the nation to the forces of a foreign power, but the defence command cannot be attributed any responsibility for the resulting debacle. For considerations entirely his own, a cabinet minister may operate a smugglers' ring; it will, however, be patently unfair to describe the government he belongs to as one offering protection to smugglers. A vice chancellor, for considerations entirely his own, may manipulate the results of the university examinations so as to ensure that his near and dear ones, year in and year out, pass out, with first class marks; it will nonetheless be absurd to rush to the judgement that the university is shot with corruption. Civil servants, for considerations entirely their own, will award work contracts to parties who most grease their palms; it will, however, be doing violence to Linguistics to call the government names. For considerations entirely their own, film producers and directors may indulge in the pastime of violating the maidenhead of young, aspiring damsels on the promise of rewarding them with instant stardom; it will, however, be altogether far-fetched to refer to the film industry as a den of filth and vice. For considerations entirely their own, distinguished office bearers of chambers, of commerce and industry may specialize in over - or

under - invoicing or evading payment of excise duties and sales taxes; still, it is only your prejudice which will show in case you want to conclude that the chambers of commerce are by and large dominated by crooks and thieves.

It is easy to describe an epoch by its external symbols; it is more awkward to define it. But, as history's long terrain has proved, we barely worry over the lack of appropriate definitions. Civilizations leave behind their signature in edicts and inscriptions. Centuries float by, structures crumble, ruins become the staple of archaeology, but bits and pieces, lying in heaps here and there, somehow continue to bear evidence of a common pattern of identity. And we encounter few problems in distinguishing one epoch from another. The judge's famous observations on the character of the genocide organized in the nation's capital against the Sikh community three years ago will, perhaps a thousand years from today, be hailed as wisdom of outstanding significance. It will capture for the historians of those times an ambience whose flavour will appear to them as altogether unique. It is easy to comprehend why this will be so. Kenneth Arrow's Impossibility Theorem has been around for some decades; individual choices cannot supposedly be translated into social preferences, collective decision-making, according to this theorem, is just a category of bunkum. The latent nihilism in Arrow has been not of a wishy-washy type till now; its vibrations in the orbit of the real world have been feeble and faint. It would probably have stayed within the confines of innocuous class rooms; overvalued economics professors would have continued to wallow in the ersatz excitement generated by its message of social impotence even while the fire would rage outside, and the fire would in due course consume the class rooms along with the assembled garbage. Have not the prospects, however, been transformed by the judge? There could be no greater vindication of the Arrowian morality than what has been provided by Justice Ranganath Misra. The judgement, the whole of it, could have

been sub-titled, An Essay in the Impossibility Theorem: for does it not tell us, succinctly and beautifully, that it is impossible to connect the perpetration of crime by individuals with the collective body of which they happen to be members?

Few bother about schools of moral philosophy as long as these schools do not receive recognition as the basis of an empirical reality. The parts may be corrupt and decaying, the whole, may nonetheless be the soul of integrity: it is a daring assertion to make, and all exceptionally difficult one to prove. The judge is, however, more than confident that he has proved it to his own satisfaction, and it would be anarchy should a judge's judgement be called in question. Should, as a consequence of the report the judge has submitted, a nihilist social doctrine now receive an accidental accolade, the theists of the world would justifiably succeed in finding plenty to rejoice in. Who knows, a thousand years hence, a dusty, worm-ridden copy of the judge's report will be hailed as confirmatory evidence of the beginning of a new epoch, an epoch heralding the advent of a morality which absolved from punishment all acts of collective butchery on the pretext that such acts can never be proven, *vide* the Impossibility Theorem.

There is just one thorn in the flesh. Has not the judge, in preaching his version of social philosophy, also created a pitfall for himself? For there can be analogues of the concept of 'considerations entirely their own', such as satisfaction derived by an individual entirely on his own, which need not be and may not be equated with collective satisfaction. A judge may reach a set of conclusions after he has satisfied himself that everything was perfect with his collation and analysis of facts. But mischief has been set afoot, and once it is accepted that an association is not to be held responsible for acts committed by its members for considerations entirely their own, a well-meaning neighbour may take it upon his head to advance the point of view that society need not go along with conclusions reached by a judge

according to his own satisfaction. The given framework of legality notwithstanding, society may then presume to proclaim that it could not be held responsible for judgements delivered by one of its constituent judges, and it would, therefore, assume no responsibility to enforce such judgements. Symptoms abound to suggest that we are rapidly advancing to that blissful land of pervasive anarchy. The so-called terrorists in Punjab could not have hoped for a better Baisakhi gift than the Ranganath Misra Report.

MARCH, 1987

## NO SUBSTITUTE FOR CLASS WAR

Impossible to shake it off, Gresham's Law is for ever, Great causes stumble midway, but undertakings of dubious credentials continues to flourish. According to rumours that are afloat, the barricades of resistance against the Sardar Sarovar and Narmada dam projects have weakened; at least the fervour of protest is no longer as deep as it was some seasons ago. Perhaps, following the Morse report and one or two diplomatic gestures on the part of the World Bank, the movement is now caught in two minds. The fissure within its ranks conceivably did not happen on its own; it was engineered, and with cleverness. The strategy of divide and triumph belongs to the same genre as that of divide and rule. Even so, there is not much mileage to be had any more in heaping all the blame for things going awry on the evil legacy left behind by the wretched imperial rulers. Schisms have a genealogy in this neighbourhood which reaches way back into ancient history: the over contributions of the imperialists are of marginal significance. Subjective factors in fact play a much bigger role in the creation of splits and divisions. Consider, at random, any movement involving so-called public interest issues. It begins with noble intentions, good people come together, they know their mind, they are steadfast in their objective, the movement gains momentum, young people, their intellect aglow with idealism, chuck their studies or jobs and gravitate toward the cause, the intensity of their commitment induces even detached eyes to be filled with tears, there is much hymnal

singing of invocations of the we shall overcome genre. The mobilization of public support is helped in the beginning by the fairly widespread sense of disenchantment with established political formations. To suggest that the young ones are no longer stirred by the passion of ideology will be somewhat of an exaggeration. No, passion is not dead, it is only that it does not get ensnared that easily by the charms of conventional going-on. It is in a sense a re-run of what happened in the late sixties. Streams of young people, in both town and country, were unable to reconcile themselves with the predictable, often cliché-ridden genuflections of the older generation of devotees to the Marxist cause. They chose to break away. They constituted a separate, avant garde community of day-dreamers. They took pride in their purity and perhaps did not stop to think that the conventional crowd too had felt proud, for precisely the same reason, two, three or four decades ago. The day-dreamers are in all seasons an impatient lot; more so if it is early spring. Their bubbling youth hustles them into leaving the beaten tract. Breaking away is, however, an awesome process, akin to the splitting of the neutrons: the more they split, the greater is the explosive potential of the elementary particles reached out to. The past thirty years have seen an unending procession of tearing away from one another by groups and individuals who nonetheless have kept swearing by Marxism Leninism-Maoism. On each occasion a parting took place, the agony accompanying the act was sincerest, and yet a certain inevitability attached to the mechanism of schism. The cause had to be rendered purer, the goals had to be constantly re-appraised, the old baggage of practices needed to be discarded and substituted by new ones; hang-ups and revolutionary praxis did not ever go together.

Many of these young people, who spurned the trodden path, led, for years on end, a fugitive existence. They arraigned themselves against the established system of law and order; they learned to rough it out and were, both physically and

psychologically, prepared to continue in this manner, in case necessary, for they would have said, a whole millennium. Their sacrifices knew no bounds; their courage and grit were invested with strength of an extraordinary quality.

Not all such groups were equally successful even in terms of the criteria they set for themselves; most of them have actually not been successful at all. Several of them have disintegrated. The People's War Group in Andhra Pradesh, currently much in the news, has had more success than most of the rest. This fact does not by itself imply that similar other formations, not as successful, do not deserve regard or consideration, or that their devotion to the cause or causes they have attached themselves to are of a lesser order, of significance.

And yet, what is the point in not calling a spade a spade, a substantial number of those belonging to these groups have been victims of the malady of splittism. There is a pattern of repetitiveness in what takes place. Long, very long theses, replete with involved narrations of dialectical disputes, are prepared to justify a further parting of ways: x expels y, y expels x the two occurrences happen almost simultaneously, or within a very short interval of time. It simply will not do to question the integrity of the ideological stance x or y has assumed. But a parallel phenomenon is also at work, the gradual ascendancy of the ego factor, the coagulation of an attitude of mind which assumes more or less the following form: my premises, the processes of my reasoning and, therefore, my conclusions are axiomatically superior to yours, period. The abstraction described as consciousness is really a compendium of memories filtering through the generations. The snobbery of ideological sophistication too is an inheritance. The primogeniture can be traced back to the grammarians who dominated the proceedings of royal courts, in this country and elsewhere a couple of thousand years ago. In that distant epoch, grammar was considered to be the *élan vital* of language, language in any case

was the basic ingredient of thought, thought was synonymous with ideology. The Marxist cliché does not lose its import merely because it is a cliché: in any society, the idea of the ruling classes emerges, inexorably, as the ruling idea. It is therefore no surprise that the fastidiousness of grammar, flaunted in the days of yore, has continued to influence the dialectical logic of revolutionary groups in current times. By an identical process of reasoning, the ideas of leading comrades too become the leading ideas within each revolutionary group. In case there happens to be more than one aspirant to leadership, or two comrades with about equal force of personality, the parting of ways becomes inevitable. Any suggestion for adjustment and compromise is straightforwardly ruled out because of the subjective factors involved. Besides, determinism and multiple choices do not go together.

In an ambience where, because of particular circumstances, philosophical wanderings begin to supplant revolutionary praxis, leading men cannot avoid the destiny of donning the role of leading squabblers. And that is how the trouble starts. The moment speculation tends to edge out practice from the roster of revolutionary chores, splits emerge as the concomitant reality. The People's War Group aforementioned, is without question the most coherent – and in that sense that most powerful – among the radical left groups still active in the country. But it too is riven by bitter internal disputations.

As the difficulties currently being encountered, according to reports, by 'social activist' groups, such as the protesters against the Narmada Valley Saradar Sarovar projects, suggest, even supposedly nonpolitical formations are unable to escape from the canker – if you want to call it that – of subjectivism. They too split, and on account of the clash of personal egos. A gloss is sought to be put, with evident sincerity, on the rupture; it is blandly described as the outcome of divergence in philosophical approaches. More often than not, these so-called philosophical

divergences have mundane roots, such as differing views on whether the nature of the movement should not gradually approximate to that of non-government organizations in the Western countries and in countries heavily influenced by the managerial ideology of the West. Or the differences could arise on the question of acceptance of foreign funding, or whether the campaign should continue within the geographical confines of the country or should be carried to within the citadels of such institutions as the World Bank, given their vast clout to do good or evil because of their capability to offer unlimited financial backing to environmentally sensitive projects. Underlying these debates are often crass subjective considerations. That they themselves are also afflicted by such problems ought in fact to provide cheer to the ecological groups, for it is a tribute to their tenet, namely, environment makes the man/the woman/the person: if society as a whole is patterned by the class of egos, how do the environment groups then prevent their members from going on ego-trips?

It is, however, possible to reach a different kind of conclusion from this medley of happenings. Once the idealists discover to their mortification that, alas, there is no pure cause, even supposedly nonpolitical endeavours are tinted by the bane of subjectivism, and in the final analysis, the seizure of power is what matters even in such arenas as the battle over ecological purity, they might as well decide to trek back to the fold of political activism. The concern for environment, some of them might perhaps begin to admit, cannot by itself attain the stature of a whole ideology. The preservation or destruction of nature is an issue inseparable from considerations of the profit motive in an ambience which breathes the free market philosophy. If not anything else, the controversies raging over the Sardar Sarovar-Narmada Valley projects would have at least revealed the basic reality of the environmental battle: it too is a manifestation of the class war; only mobilization along class lines can frustrate the

enemy. If such be the case, why not volunteer to join active combat in the class war itself?

A by product of a train of thought of this nature activising itself could be the accumulation of a feeling of revulsion against the temple-builders. The money reportedly set aside for completion of the structure of the Ram Lala could rehabilitate, several times over, the hundreds of thousands of helpless villagers threatened with displacement because of the Narmada Valley-Sardar Sarovar projects. The ecological ideologues should be bemused no end at the spectacle of the wholesale disruption of the nation's economic and social agenda by the devotees of Hindutva. The catechism of first things first has thereby been rendered into one of worst things first; primal emotions are threatening to waylay the process of reasoning. Non-political green-peaceniks cannot obviously make any advance against such forces of primitivism. Irrational religiosity can be challenged only by an ideology based on rational processes of thought and backed by class power. One learns this the hard way; the tribulation is worth it as long as the learning percolates where it ought to.

FEBRUARY, 1993

## THE LITTLE HOME TRUTH

Of course simple issues can be made to look difficult, but is that really necessary? Take Assam for instance. During the past thirty years, the population in Assam's countryside – natural growth and accretion from migration considered together – has been roughly 3 per cent per annum; in contrast, the annual rate of growth of farm output in the state has been barely 1.5 per cent. Per capita rural income has evidently declined precipitously in the state, and levels of living too must have come down, whatever the planning commission, armed by its set of national sample survey data, may say. One can try to add some sophistication to the assessment by taking into account supplementary earnings from non-agricultural activities which go on in the rural areas; the face of reality is unlikely to be altered much thereby. The other kind of sophistication – attempting to estimate magnitudes of unemployment and under-employment – may be lovely grist for the mill of a bright young Ph.D. thesis writer, but our understanding of the nature of problems convulsing this part of the country will be barely enhanced thereby. Economic development is by-passing Assam's countryside, and most of the state is made up by its countryside. And what is true of Assam is about equally true of the rest of the north-eastern region. When population grows at the rate of 3 per cent, and farm output at the rate of 1.5 per cent, you have economic retrogression. Itinerant public relations men in the

service of New Delhi may reach other conclusions. That, however, is their problem.

Unfortunately, that does not stay as their problem. Since Delhi is the place where the key decisions affecting the nation are taken, conclusions reached by its emissaries are invested in all seasons with extraordinary weight. If it is their view that in the country's north-eastern region everything is just fine and beautiful, the conditions of life are sylvan and the indolent-looking people look so because they are full of contentment, little will be done to hasten the pace of economic development in this region; there will be no sense of urgency, and priorities will remain unchanged. True, in the early 1970s, a north-eastern council was set up, and asked to prepare a blue-print of development for the region and co-ordinate the social and economic programmes initiated in the states and union territories comprising the region. It has turned out to be just another essay-writing shop. Essays are neutral entities: they do not do anybody any harm, but by themselves they are unable to accomplish any good either.

For those who live in Assam and in the rest of the north-eastern region, there is scanty pleasure or glamour in being the object of some haggard statistics. It is they who have to cope with the reality which the statistics betray. With not enough growth in output to take care of the growth in human numbers, per capita availability of food and, by necessity, of other essential articles too is declining. This region was always a *ménage* of diverse tribes and communities adhering to a wide array of ethnicities. Many of these tribes and groups the British wanted to keep isolated from the rising tide of democratic aspirations flooding the plains of Hindustan. They accordingly set up the device of 'excluded' areas; the residents of such areas were to be excluded from receiving even the tiny morsels of benediction from the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms or what, following the visit of Sir John Simon and his Commission, emerged as the

Government of India Act, 1935. One or two perfunctory provisions for ensuring that these 'excluded' people were not overly exploited by the moneylenders from the plains, or that their land was not appropriated by marauding outsiders, and the British assumed their imperial obligations were over: the rest was a matter for the army and the frontier police.

A very large part of our Constitution was copied, almost verbatim, from the Government of India Act 1935. The arrangements for the areas the British had decided to 'exclude' in the 1935 Act were more or less left unchanged in the Constitution. Many of these areas were converted into union territories; the process of democratic governance on the basis of adult suffrage was withheld from these territories. A few other areas were segregated into special districts within a state; the state government's jurisdiction over these areas was subjected to umpteen limitations. This again was an echo from the 1935 Act, with only this difference that, instead of the viceroy and governor-general, the centre was to take a major hand in administering such districts via the intermediary of the governor. The British were determined to protect these frontier territories from the contamination of provincial autonomy. Our constitution faithfully aped the British intent. Neither imagination nor foresight was brought into play. The major role assigned to the army and the border police was adequate for the purpose of the British. After all, they had only the imperial image to sustain, economic development was not on their agenda. In the plains of Hindustan too, the long decades following the Rebellion of 1857 were marked by general stagnation; as far as the economic indicators were concerned, there was therefore no question of two strikingly divergent series emerging either.

With the advent of state governments and five-year plans, it is a changed landscape in the plains of Hindustan since the 1950s. True, it is a mixed picture, with some states experiencing a much larger gain than others, some states getting a larger share

of irrigation and fertilizer and higher-yielding varieties of seeds and therefore registering a higher rate of agricultural growth than others, some states capturing a larger share of licences and outlay by public financial institutions than others and therefore having a higher rate of industrial growth than others, and some states having a larger share of direct central investments than others. In the temporal sense too, progress in the states has been uneven; in some states, acceleration has been followed by a slowing down in the rate of growth; in others, following a slow beginning, the rate of growth has picked up. These differences notwithstanding, in most parts of the country, the overall rate of economic growth has stayed ahead of the rate of population growth, and per capita real income has advanced, howsoever modestly. True, in most states, the distribution of income and assets remains frighteningly skewed, and for some segments of the population, the rise in real earnings must have been very, very meager indeed, or none at all.

Even so, the contrast between what has been happening, or, rather not happening in Assam and the rest of the north-eastern region and developments in most other part of the country could not be more obvious. Neither investment nor technology has been permitted to make any worthwhile headway in these parts, with the result that the growth of production, particularly in the vast stretches of the countryside has lagged way behind the growth of population, and per capita income has actually fallen, quite unlike in the other parts of the country. It is two divergent series of per capita growth, because it is two divergent series of investment and application of technology. A hillbilly Dickens up in the Khasi hills or Jorhat downs has every right to paraphrase: it is the best of times, it is the worst of times...

There is lack of income, lack of jobs, lack of opportunities. The middle-class youth in the Assam valley have been persuaded that the variable to tackle is the growth in human numbers at 3 per cent per annum. The villain of the piece, they have

concluded, is immigration; catch hold of the migrants and throw them back to where they had come from, the growth in numbers will drop dramatically, and Assam's problems will be over. Those who are dubbed as migrants are, however, not peripheral entities; they will fight tooth and nail and claw any changes proposed in citizenship laws or rules in regard to procedures for the detection of immigrants. They will even argue that everybody in Assam is a migrant, some arrived from Bengal two hundred or a hundred years ago, some others thirty or twenty years ago, some descended from the hills five hundred years ago, some barely fifty years ago, so who has the prerogative to throw whom out? The competition for occupying space will soon intensify and spill beyond the syndrome of imbroglios between the Assamese-speaking versus the Bengali-speaking: the tribal communities will begin to challenge the non-all tribes, and then the sects within each tribe will construct their own dialectics. It can be an unending divisive game, at the end of which there will be only the silence of the grave.

The youth in Assam are otherwise engaged, they are much too worked up, otherwise they could have been counseled that, rather than concentrating on the daunting statistics of numbers, they ought to concern themselves on the morphology of quasi-stagnancy in production and productivity. And the problem, they could have been gently reminded, is not specific to Assam, it is equally acutely relevant for the rest of the north-east as well as for most of the eastern states. If, thanks of the sudden coming into prominence of a discharged lance corporal from the army, the dilemma of the northern districts of West Bengal has of late been thrust to the fore, those afflicting the southern districts in the state are no different. The data is all there, at one's beck and call. All one has to do is engage in a detailed listing of the eighty-odd districts of the eastern and north-eastern states and union territories, put down side by side the rate of growth of crop output and that of population for each; in the case of at large

two-thirds of the districts, the former, it will be seen, trails the latter, so much so that per capita real income has dropped in each of these districts since the time the nation gave itself over to the five-year plans. The reason for this denouement is straight and simple; per capita investment in the vast majority of these districts has been altogether insignificant in the past thirty-odd years, and would not average to more than one-third of the average for all the other districts of the country. Much of the investment that has in fact taken place, for instance in the north-eastern region or the hill districts of northern Bengal, has been largely induced by the requirements of the army, such as roads and bridges in forlorn tracts. What has been considered as priority for the army is hardly priority for the people.

It is little use blaming the administrations of the states and union territories for this state of affairs. You have, from New Delhi, centralized finances and established total control over all other resources too, the Planning Commission and the Finance Commission and the rest of the paraphernalia belong to you. You have been most impressed by the imperial design which the Government of India Act 1935 was, and you scribbled from it copiously while writing your constitution. It will be contemptible cowardice if you now try to pass on the blame to the state governments. More so since, such as in the case of Darjeeling, the state government concerned has been lobbying hard for the past several years to get your sanction for the formation of an autonomous council which could have enabled the ethnic community there to have a more direct say in the administration and management of whatever limited prerogative and finances are made available — a proposal you have been obstinately opposing.

Obligations go hand in hand with privileges. You feel proud in proclaiming to the world that the British passed on to you the imperial mantle, and the McMahon Line is not negotiable. The territory immediately below the McMahon Line is, however,

territory filled with human beings. They may not like to stay 'excluded' either from the processes of democracy or the processes of development for long, whatever the British intent might have been. The forthcoming decades will be altogether unquiet if this little home-truth does not percolate to the appropriate quarters.

JANUARY, 1987

### THE LUMPENS HAVE TAKEN OVER

Why not say it, one major factor contributing to the sorry state the country is in is the quality of politicians and ministers - ministers not just at the centre but in the state governments too. They are mostly very ordinary individuals; their incompetence reflects this ordinariness. They cannot do better, because they are incapable of doing better. Their intellectual equipment is poor; their comprehension of events unfolding around them is therefore either wayward or superficial. Little point in beating about the bush, one might as well name names. P.V. Narasimha Rao, despite his reported acumen in literature and languages, is not a patch on Jawaharlal Nehru; the credentials of Arjun Singh, currently guiding the educational destiny of the nation, could not bear comparison with the sagacity and scholarship of the nation's first minister of education, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad; apply any criterion, men like Buta Singh, Makhan Lal Fotedar and Kalpanath Rai could not have held a candle to even the junior ministers attached to C. Rajagopalachary and Govind Ballabh Pant when they held office. The secular decline in the quality of politicians in the opposition is equally striking. The first parliament could boast of luminaries like M.N. Saha, K.T. Shah, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee and Hiren Mukherjee; their current replacement are more often than not junior college lecturers or school teachers from district towns who have made it to the Lok Sabha because of their

proximity to those flaunting money or muscles. This is no process of proletarianism; it is just plebeianism of a rather mean sort.

Managing this huge, complex country is evidently too much for the present generation of politicians. They are persons of limited perception; their administrative ability is equally constricted. Little serious parliament; most of the time is set aside for the display of lung power. Such a denouement should evoke no surprise: shouting is about the only activity the majority of the MPs can claim to excel in. The problems afflicting the country have multiplied a hundred-fold over the past four and a half decades; in contrast, the level of efficiency of those in charge of the national administration has actually gone down by quite a few notches. Not that the adage – as a nation matures, its political leadership too does – is thereby discredited wholesale; this nation, it can be argued, has not matured at all, so why should the political leadership grow wise either?

It is necessary to be even-handed in one's summing-up though. Is not the calibre of the present set of leaders relatable to processes set in motion by the earlier generation of politicians themselves? Was not our beginning, alas, the beginning of our end too? It is not merely the instance of the Constitution, a miserable pastiche of inconsistencies and contradictions the politicians stitched together at that time. There were other incongruities. Jawaharlal Nehru, a supposed socialist, was a man of marked ambivalence. An aristocrat in his demeanour and mode of daily living, he took particular pride in the taken-to-axiomatic glorious sacrifices his family made to the nation's cause. Following his active encouragement, democratic practice was reduced to polyphony: only a few families mattered; leaders picked their successors from amongst their near and dear ones. Nehru saw nothing wrong in naming his own daughter, at that time a non-descript society hostess, as president of the Indian National Congress. Should anyone have dared to challenge his

choice, he might have condescended to stress to point that her personal qualities were in no way inferior to those of the others who could have been serious contenders for the position. The consequences of the particular decision, with its implicit acknowledgement of the dynastic principle of succession, however proved to be far-reaching. Again, one must at least try to be fair. Indira Gandhi, was, despite her political and academic non-credentials an exceptionally sophisticated person; she had a natural elegance; she grew up to love books and painting; she could have held her own in *avant-garde* salons in Paris. There is no question she adapted herself quickly to the fast track of politics. Even so, the negative aspects of her character could not quite be wished away. Her *hauteur* surpassed her father's. She failed to liberate herself from the credo of dynastic succession. Or it was presumably a little bit more complicated than that; her reflexes were those of a socially insecure individual who, in times of stress, clings to those regarded as trustworthy beyond dispute. It was perhaps a happenstance that, in her case, this circle was confined to her family. When played into a corner, she sought support exclusively from her own offspring. Her sons, according to her judgement, were *per se* more competent to assume control of the nation's affairs than the general rabble of politicians perambulating in the outer corridor. The slide towards mediocrity, and worse, was the direct outcome of the ascendancy of such a scale of values. Another of her decisions was equally far-reaching. The procedure of periodic elections based on adult suffrage, she concluded, had its own compulsions: it called for unlimited campaign funds, which she and her party had to raise by whatever means possible. Money power thereby got wedded to the system. Money power brought in its wake muscle power. The admixture of the clout of money, the clout of goons and the principle of dynastic succession swiftly transformed the structure of politics; it also wrote *finis* to the theme of administrative competence.

A yet further charge needs to be posted against Indira Gandhi. Money power by itself was not sufficient, she convinced herself, to win elections. The religiosity of the Indian people had to be made use of too. The electronic media could be put to excellent use for this purpose. Blanket the country with television sets, and blanket the television screen with visual presentations of deep religious-mindedness; somewhere along the line, smuggle in her image, the goddess of a leader who continuously seeks the counsel of this or that jagatguru, who keeps hopping from temple to mosque to church to synagogue, who prays forever with her beads for the nation's well-being and salvation.

The son succeeding her as prime minister was of average merit and intelligence. He was perhaps well-intentioned in his own manner, but otherwise a somewhat dim-witted individual. He had little time to spare for those indulging in books and scholarly pursuits. The sophisticated crowd both the grandfather and the mother used to cultivate was not his cup of tea. His tastes and preference were more mundane. He nonetheless assimilated well the political logic his mother had pursued: to survive in power, it was necessary to arrange for money and muscle power; it was equally necessary to exploit to the hilt religiosity and the electronics media. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* serials prospered during his time; these changed the face of Indian history. The son went further. He unlocked the closed premises of the 'disputed' site at Ayodhya. This gesture of Hindu religiosity he balanced by amending, following the Shah Bano Judgement, legislation pertaining to the divorce of Muslim women and by clamping a ban on Salman Rushdie's book. To balance these latter decisions, at the next round, he scampered to listen to the sage advice of the machan baba and permitted shilanyas within the precincts of the Babri Masjid. He thus propelled the impulses which have now brought India very close to disintegration.

There are other facets of this absorbing tale. Rajiv Gandhi

was a naïve, ordinary person. Like any ordinary person, he was enamoured of the good things in life. Given the sheltered existence he had led, he had little awareness of such basic issues of national life as poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy and joblessness: the complicated mechanics of economic growth was beyond the ken of his comprehension. Everybody, not excluding the poor, should, he must have thought, have the good things in life, such things as advanced western technology is able to produce. Economic policy was accordingly encapsulated by him into unbridled import of foreign technology and of foreign luxury goods. Foreign exchange was, however, required for paying for such imports, which was a bother. But never mind; where there is a will, there is a way. The rest of the story is fairly well known. To pay for the heavy imports, Rajiv Gandhi's government chose to borrow indiscriminately in the international capital market. The massive borrowings led, inevitably, to the debt trap. We are reduced to a state where our survival is contingent upon the munificence of foreigners. But charity does not drop gratis, like manna from heaven. We have to pay for it; we are paying for it by in effect surrendering our sovereignty. The apologists of the arrangement make no bone about it; the person we appoint as finance minister, they assert unabashedly, must enjoy the confidence of our paymasters.

Such then are the quirks of history. A not-terribly-bright person like Rajiv Gandhi succeeded in triggering off a chain of events which have transformed India in a manner that would have been beyond the wildest imagination of either Jawaharlal Nehru or Indira Gandhi. It cannot be helped if not their own party, the Congress, but the Bharatiya Janata Party has emerged as the principal beneficiary of Rajiv Gandhi's epoch-making initiatives. It is not the indirect, informal electoral arrangement the Janata Dal entered into with it which allowed the BJP to raise its strength in the Lok Sabha from two in 1984 to eighty-six in 1989 and one hundred nineteen in 1991; the credit should

really go to the communal frenzy begotten by the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* serials beamed by Doordarshan. Render unto Ramanand Sagar what belongs to Ramanand Sagar. There would have been no Ramanand Sagar without Rajiv Gandhi.

The BJP is currently paying not just the Ramlala card; it is also playing, equally determinedly, the card of economic self-reliance. It has been both clever and unscrupulous, running up and down on both sides of the street. It has strongly come down on the side of economic liberalization and the abolition of industrial controls. As a result, the party has attracted droves of admiring businessmen and industrialists to its fold. It is today an enormously rich party and can match, black money for black money, the affluence of the Congress. It has not, however, failed to stoke the fire of mass discontent over rising prices and growing unemployment which liberalization measures have brought in their reign. Besides, its espousal of *swadeshi* and economic self-reliance has put into shade the feeble protestations of both the Gandhians and the Left ideologues.

In this country now populated by politicians of the mediocre breed, the BJP, marginally cleverer than the rest, has, not surprisingly, come up trumps. Not only have P.V. Narasimha Rao and his retinue, been reduced to the state BJP's camp-followers, or, as some uncharitable remarked, its juniors. Even the Left is hardly doing any good. According to latest reports, they are trying hard to explain to the masses the ingredients of Hindutva, and what Swami Vivekananda and others really meant. The fight therefore is no longer over the choice of contextuels, but over their interpretation. The war, in other words, is fought on the grounds indicated by the BJP. That is to say, the Left too has implicitly accepted the notion of India being a religious republic. The struggle for the soul of India has thus been made into a brand war; our brand of Hindus is superior to theirs, so, please, join our procession, and let us give the fellows against us a bloody nose.

That such outrageous farce has been elevated to the status of respectable is of course on account of the degeneracy of the system. A proletarian revolution is far off. Meanwhile, the fourth and fifth rate politicians rule the roost. The BJP is doing a shade better because the politicians in its fold happen to be only second or third rate. There is little point in being snooty though: the country now belongs to mediocrities, but these mediocrities are the end-product of a historical process which began with the nation's sage founding fathers.

MAY, 1993

## ON THE WAY TO THE AMPHITHEATRE

Why not say it? The standard first query in a murder investigation is on the identity of the person likely to benefit from the crime. This is the reason for the raised eyebrows at the manner the Congress(I) party has gone about in the past few weeks, squeezing the maximum electoral advantage from the doing away of its president. The assassination has indeed left the party totally without its co-ordinates. We are therefore once more face to face with the Joan Robinsonian riddle: make any generalization about India, its obverse is equally true. The murder, brutally planned and executed, packed a whole lot of hatred. But should we nonetheless withhold to hate the four-flushers who, right in the midst of the trauma the nation is in, try to hustle the mourning widow into taken over the helmsmanship of the slain husband's party? If she would not fall for the trap, why not entice the teenage daughter by dangling the crown of the Youth Congress before her? After all this, one is almost attuned to listening to the cynical whisperings that are on: the pity of it, if only he had been done to death a couple of days ago, the first phase of the elections too could have benefited from the sympathy wave. According to the opinion of the nation's supreme judiciary, the prerogative to countermand elections wholesale; why not in any event make a last ditch effort by appealing to him? One Congress (I) lining newspaper has not failed in the task. The dastardly occurrence on the night of 21

May, has, it has argued in beautiful prose, ushered in a qualitatively different situation in the country; it is somehow unfair that the general elections, which ought to be held simultaneously all over the country, would have to bear the blemish on account of this schizophrenia; please, in the circumstances, should not the chief election commissioner boldly order fresh elections in each of the two hundred-odd constituencies where voting had taken place on the day preceding the heinous assassination?

Proposals of such an outrageous nature are posted without the least sign of embarrassment; politics, after all, is the art of survival. Secularism above all, the party is pledged to fight to its last breath the pernicious doctrine of Hindutva. But such constraints must not intrude when the party is tackling the most serious crisis in its career. The calculations are fine-tuned: the near chaos in the first party of the nation could not but induce the leaders and the cadres of the Bharatiya Janata Party to invoke, in the final phase of the electoral battle, the 'killer instinct'; the display of exuberance on their part would scare the daylights out of the citizenry belonging to minority communities; for dear life, they would vote en masse for the party most likely to succeed against the BJP, which, in current reckoning, is bound to be the Congress(I). With the minority vote thus assured, the party should now have no qualms to go all out to recapture the loyalty of the majority community. Secularism therefore deserves to be shoved aside for the next fortnight; it has to be a purposeful, elongated carnival of the grossest Hindu rituals all the way to Kanyakumari, the government has thoughtfully provided both special trains and Black Cats, the guarding minstrels, the urns carrying the murdered former prime minister's ashes would therefore have the maximum exposure. Doordarshan, praise be to it, had already done its preliminary bit. The obnoxious doctrine of Hindutva has to be fought all the way; however, use a thorn, the scriptures advise, to remove a thorn. The Hindu

ambivalence, which some would describe as cupidity, emerges resplendently triumphant. Once a Hindu, you are always deemed to be a Hindu despite how many number of times you openly repudiate the faith. Similarly, once the nation has been labelled a secular republic, it is for keeps a secular republic, irrespective of the systematic violation of rudimentary secular principles directly under the auspices of the state, such as the unabashed sponsoring of Hindu rituals under the pretext of organizing a state funeral.

The murder has thus provided no shock therapy. The foreign-born widow of the felled former prime minister has, as of this moment, refused to go along, otherwise the script appears to be entirely according to order. Hypocrisy continues to be the guiding spirit in whatever the party says and does. To allay the doubts in some minds whether or not the murdered leader was not already divine, he is conferred, post-haste, posthumous divinity. Much of the current mess in Punjab and Kashmir is the product of exclusive misdoings on the party of Rajiv Gandhi and his mother; the fatuous accords he was in the habit of signing every now and then actually further destabilized law and order in the different corners of the country; the authoritarianism he graduated into in the course of his tenure as prime minister was no less egregious than the mother's, and resulted in the further worsening of Centre-State relations; as prime minister, he gave respectability to the point of view that, as far as economics was concerned, the poor were not relevant, only the minuscule rich and the precious foreigners were; the nation, that is, that segment of it which mattered, was accordingly invited to plunge into a great liberal hoopla, and foreign exchange was considered to be a free commodity like air or water, if you happen to be short of it, why bother, just borrow; the country's total external debt consequently jumped five times over the short span of five years, it is henceforth a deadly debt trap. He, Rajiv Gandhi, drove the last nail into the coffin of his grandfather's dream of a self-reliant,

self-sustaining economy; the backroom boys he strategically placed in the nooks and corners of government are now busy preparing memoranda and schedules of understanding whereby a major slice of the nation's sovereignty is proposed to be pliantly gifted to foreigners. If fundamentalists of assorted hues are currently holding the nation to ransom, should not the accountability for that too be laid at the door of his famous vacillations? A notification in 1986 under the Preservation of Ancient Monuments Act could have taken care, at inception, of the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi squabble. He, Rajiv Gandhi, however, spurned earnest advice pouring in from scholars and secular-minded public men. He was instead much taken up by the exciting idea that Indian secularism does not mean separating the state from the church and the temple and the dargah and the gurudwara and the synagogue; the state, on the contrary, should take turns to be sweetly reasonable to each and every religious denomination. *Ramayana-Mahabharata* on the Doordarshan screen has been without question the single biggest factor stoking Hindu revivalism in the country. Rajiv Gandhi's men considered that to be one of their grandest achievements, and proceeded to balance their scale of secularism by commissioning inanities from the Bible and canonizing the sword of Tipu Sultan. The folly did not quite stop here. The computer boys informed Indira Gandhi's offspring that he could sail through the 1989 elections by playing the straight Hindu card; since a card is a card, he rushed to sign one further accord, this time with the goons of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, he nodded his concurrence with the first *shilanyas* and co-opted the slogan of *Ram Rajya* as his opening gambit in the poll campaign. Naivete was his second nature; these insolences, he genuinely thought, could be compensated by slapping down a ban on Salman Rushdie.

India is no longer much of a nation. There is little point in dissembling, that such is the state of affairs is almost entirely

attributable to the later doings of the Nehru-Gandhis. More than others, the pall-bearers of the Congress(I) ought to take cognizance of this simple reality: their present plight is not on account of the accursed times, it is because they allowed themselves to be blindly led by the dynasty into the thrall of authoritarianism. The party has now begun to dilate on the need for internal democratization. Even so, it cannot restrain itself from the temptation to seek votes by putting on display the dying embers of the dynasty. Few, very few, in the party have yet developed the perception to identify the nature of the hiatus between their pledges and their propensities.

Does not part of the same complaint hold against those who proclaim themselves to be as much against Hindu obscurantism as secularism? The fundamentalists threatening to overrun the nation are not waving the flag of Hindutva alone; they are also collecting the crowd by their supra-nationalist harangues on Punjab and Kashmir; a horrendous spirit of jingoism is consequently abroad in many parts of the country. The cult of high defence outlay, and of an ample nuclear deterrent accompanying it is an additional stock-in-trade of the rampaging demagogues. Their version of nationalism would once upon a time not look askance at the notion of self-contained, self-reliant growth. No longer. Big business has caught on to the possibilities latent in Hindu obscurantism. It is a unipolar world; the Americans, the masters of all they behold, have revised their manuals; they are about to smoke the pipe of peace with the fundamentalists in West Asia. If Islamic obscurantists are acceptable to Foggy Bottom, Hindu fundamentalists too can then live on hope, the deep is bound to respond to the deep. The BJP has therefore been duly briefed; it has decided to go the whole hog to welcome, lock stock and barrel, the grand panacea of economic liberalization.

The battle obviously has to be joined. The supposedly Left and democratic political alternative in the country can hardly

hope to make itself credible by toeing the fundamentalist line on Punjab and Kashmir; it has to strike out on its own. State violence it must have the courage to assert, is no answer to discontent which has its roots in mass deprivation. The unrest in Assam too is a direct outcome of the most perverse application of the imperial principle in Centre-State arrangements. On all such matters, including the issue of inordinately high defence expenditure and defence imports which only help domestic commission agents and foreign armament merchants, the Left has to shed its post-1962 psychosis. Rajiv Gandhi's assassination should have provided the occasion for a general spring-cleaning. Unfortunately, it has not, at least not till now, and there are few signs that, unless pushed by circumstances, overall political behaviour in the country is to undergo any qualitative transformation in the near future. The nation will therefore continue to stagger from one crisis to the next. That is, in case it still survives as a nation, so many funny things could happen while one is on one's way to the amphitheatre.

JUNE, 1991

## WRETCHEDLY BAD ECONOMICS

Applaud him for his stamina, praise him for his gumption. At the completion of his one hundred thirty-five minutes long budget speech, which he had dedicated to the memory of Rajiv Gandhi, the finance minister turns his attention towards the direction of opposition leaders. Stop politicizing economic issues, he admonishes them.

It is innocence, or feigning at it? If it were a matter of a certain lack of literacy, an inability to see the interconnection between categories of reality, how does one explain the breathtaking chicanery over the abolition of the fertilizer subsidy? They need not worry, the finance minister assures the farm lobby, he will compensate them for the withdrawal of this subsidy by raising procurement prices. It would obviously be politicizing the issue if it is pointed out that by doing what he has proposed to do, he will be compensating only the rich farmers, the poorer ones, those without surplus, will be left in the lurch. Since the finance minister could not be expected to bother about such niceties, at this stage, the more intense market-lovers will perhaps take over. By their failure to produce for the market, non-surplus raising peasants, you and I will be told, have taken themselves out of the orbit of any sympathetic consideration; their poverty is clinching evidence of their inefficiency; the decision not to do anything for them is therefore sound; and

no quarters deserve to be given to those who regard it as politically motivated.

Of course the finance minister will not disclose on his own that while raising procurement prices, he will also simultaneously increase issue prices. Nor will he admit that his action will be responsible for pushing up grain prices across the board, and therefore, soon, all farm prices across-the-board. That denunciation could only give a further boost to the rate of inflation, which in any case had reached the annual average of 25 per cent in the pre-budget week. The finance minister will keep his part of the commitment to the Fund-Bank overlord to narrow the fiscal deficit in the first round; what happens in the succeeding rounds he might as well leave it to the market-lovers.

Meanwhile, a handful of conscience-stricken men and women will stand their ground. They will evoke derision, and be the butt of much righteous indignation. The Indian bourgeoisie has made up its mind: the IMF or bust, the new finance minister or bust. The media, for instance, are in raptures over the devaluation – sorry, the adjustment of the exchange rate – over the new trade and industrial policies, over the budget. Facts were never actually the strong point of the media. It is no different in the current season either. The budget *lowers* the proportion of direct tax yield to total tax revenue. The newspapers are not deterred; it is a soak-the-rich budget, blare their headlines. Some fudging is necessary, it is part of the social responsibility of the media, for otherwise gullible people might begin to place trust in their own experience, such that the fiscal burden is exclusively on the poor, and the affluent set is being let off lightly. This is not politicking, but serving the cause of the nation's second war of liberation.

It is again evidently not playing politics to heap the blame for the current economic woes on the doings and mis-doings of the two preceding regimes alone. The present finance minister, one would have thought, will find it difficult to dissociate

himself from decisions taken by at least one of those regimes: he was an integral part of it, as adviser to the incumbent prime minister, enjoying the status of a cabinet minister. Trivialities of this nature are the hobgoblins of little minds. Slightly more worrisome is selective amnesia, the failure to attribute, either squarely or faintly, the country's slide into the debt trap to policies practised by those who had presided over the polity during nine-tenths of the roaring '80s. Aha, what a convenient memory cell it is, it skips remembrance of occasions such as when another famous former civil servant, once again principal economic adviser to the then existing regime, had let drop the pearl of wisdom that the poor in this country are a most understanding lot, they would rather go hungry than not possess a colour television set. That statement was the progenitor of many momentous decisions. Pundits were immediately imported from the Bank and the Fund; India, they complained, was not borrowing enough in the international money market. What a waste; this huge, big country should have learnt the art of borrowing overseas and spending such borrowed funds with an easy abandon, thereby ensuring growth at breakneck speed, high spending is, after all, quintessential Keynes. The advice proffered was gratefully accepted, and acted upon. Within the span of a half a dozen years, the country's external indebtedness quadrupled. The development did not disturb the coolth of the Doon school of economic thought; as K.N. Raj has gallantly suggested, it was all beyond their depth. There was then that celebrated late summer and early autumn of 1989; facing a dicey general election and an artificial domestic shortage of grains, edible oils and sugar, the regime used the overseas connections of such public agencies as the State Bank of India and the Oil and Natural Gas Commission to borrow, at very stiff terms, short-term money – perhaps as much as four billion dollars. To recount how, when and why the debt service ratio jumped from below 15 per cent to close to 40 per cent is evidently not

economics, but airy fairy politics; a finance minister cannot possibly permit himself to stray into that kind of *cul de sac* in the course of his budget speech. Instead, he turns into a latter day Ashoka Mehra and indulges in wildest day-dreaming. It is basically a matter of definition; depending on the identity of the construction worker, building castles in the air is by no stretch an indolent version of politics, but hard-nut economics. Just grant them 100 per cent equity participation, multinational companies will come and occupy every nook and corner of the country, private foreign investment per annum will, give or take a couple of years, zoom from the level of around fifty million dollars to as much as three billion. The foreigners will flock in, they will be entreated to take charge of the economy, it is, however, sheer calumny to suggest that we will in the process shed some of our sovereignty. Such insinuations are politicking of the most odious order. In case the foreigners arrive, they will no doubt know how best to take care of their royalty and dividends and the gains from transfer pricing; something might also be made to happen to the country's external terms of trade, the net foreign exchange contributed by foreign investors could then turn out to be negative, as it is at present. Are not speculations of this nature, however, in effect sabotaging the patriotic cause? In this hour of gravest crisis, when a war of liberation is on, should not there be a new theism: in foreigners we trust?

The lesson sinks in, one should keep to the straight and narrow path, and not raise foolish questions. The finance minister himself, though, in one unguarded moment, has alluded to the other side of the coin. Whether the westerners arrive in strength to repossess their empire or not, devaluation and the new trade and industrial policies will, according to him, make life difficult for large sections of the citizenry. A few thousand extra factories are to close, hundreds of thousands of workers in the organized sector are to lose their jobs, umpteen small-scale units will be unable to absorb the *shokku* of the July devaluation and will go

to the wall. These are empirical correlates of the sacrifice that collective abstraction, the nation, has to bear because the non-hoi polloi chose a way of living for themselves in the past decade. Should the Fund and the Bank play ball, and the private buccaneers too behave, the country's rich might still succeed in protecting that arcadia of their. Thus acute skewness in the sharing of the burden of the second war of liberation makes it lose some of its luster. But, then, Wittgenstein shades off into Chomsky, words are what you make of them, abdication of national sovereignty is liberation.

The Plan is in limbo, the public sector is to be Thatchered, monopolies will be left in peace to mulct the citizens. Apart from monopolies and the big houses, some foreigners, at least a sprinkling of them, will, hopefully, be around. Should one have the temerity, one could still ask the finance minister whether he feels confident of achieving even limited success in the two principal-and inter-connected-areas his attention is evidently riveted on: containing the rate of inflation and improving upon the country's export performance. Devaluation has raised the rupee cost of imports, all along the line, at the first go. That could still be only a beginning. Since Fund-Bank type structural adjustment insists on raising the proportion of imports in national income, and import duties are specifically lowered for the purpose, either the volume of imports must increase, or national income must shrink, or both phenomena must occur together. Domestic costs are bound to rise in the wash. Export prospects will therefore dim. Even otherwise, considering the state of expectations and the budgetary decision – no doubt because of Fund-Bank prescription – to raise revenue mostly through higher excise levies and administered prices, inflation will experience a hastening of pace, providing independent explanation why exports are likely to remain where they are, or might even decline. It will be perhaps politicizing the issue to remind the finance minister that issue to remind the finance

minister that the rupee got depreciated to the extent easily of 300 per cent in the quarter of a century since 1966, and yet, exports as a proportion of both national income and overall global exports did not bother to move up. For a third world country exports, after all, are not a determinant, but a 'determinate' variable. The finance minister will presumably, however, rest his case by taking recourse to a clinching repartee: no empirical law exists which says that something which has not happened in the past will not happen in the future either.

Some confidences are supposedly not to be transgressed. Why strain yourself to delve into the economics of the decision to hand over a hundred crore of public money to a private trust to honour the memory of precisely the same former prime minister, during whose tenure all the things that could possibly go wrong with the economy went wrong; it hardly matters whether he understood, or had the capability to understand, the implications of the decisions taken by him or on his behalf. To confess to a feeling of nausea on account of the sycophancy oozing from each pore of the budget speech will only reveal one's subjective bias: it takes all sorts to constitute the universe, someone's economic wisdom is someone else's obscenity.

Besides, none of this is really relevant. The national economy has been coaxed into entering a phase of frenzy the consequences of which will duly work themselves out. The media have made up their mind, or have been helped to do so. Those wanting to pursue the path of independent self-reliant growth are to be given no quarters; they, it has been decided, deserve to be dispatched to the asylum; they are inward-looking as well as backward-looking. It is a bit awkward that the warnings they issued a decade ago have turned out to be devastatingly right; it is best to suppress that fact. No need either to mention, morning and afternoon about the debt trap and the falling level of unemployment and the rising number of closed and about-to-close industrial plants. Rather, attention should be

gleefully drawn to the contortions the left are going through. They have to oppose the new set of economic policies for dear life, but they dare not vote against the regime; suppose the government is voted out, a poll-weary electorate will apparently not forgive them. Whether it will forgive the left for not voting down the anti people economic measures is a matter best left undiscussed.

Stirrings are nonetheless bound to take place at other levels, both inside the system and on its periphery. Finance ministers out to surrender the nation's interests to foreigners are not the final arbiters of history. It may take a couple of months, or a couple of years, but a revulsion is bound to set in, for inflation hurts, joblessness hurts, the aggravation of inequalities between regions, classes and groups is not an inert statistical category, it has harsh real life implications. To hand back the country to capitalist colonizers is anti-history. It is also wretchedly bad economics, as finance ministers will learn, in due time, to their cost.

AUGUST, 1991

## THE AGONY OF IDEOLOGY

## A WHOLE NEW AMBIENCE

What academics refer to as contemporary history is a veritable gold mine. One has to glean just a couple of nuggets to partake of the flavour of the times.

Calcutta has a new police commissioner. As with all his predecessors, he too is a member of the ever correct Indian Police Service. But surprise, surprise. Reporters flocking to his quarters to interview him on his appointment stumbled on a discovery: one wall of his sitting room flaunted an impressive portrait of Viadimir, Illich Ulyanov, alias Lenin. The city's premier Bengali daily, which according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, is the most widely circulated newspaper in the country, is scandalized. The business house owning the paper is about the only example of successful Bengali enterprise in the second half of the twentieth century; it commands a stable of nearly fifteen newspapers, magazines and journals, dailies, weeklies and monthlies, in Bengali, English and Hindi, covering the spectrum of politics, business, gossip, entertainment, films, women's fashion, literature for adults, literature for juveniles. It straddles the West Bengal landscape like a colossus; better still, like a Caesar. Whether it is culture or literature or politics, its word is law, or at least that is how it would like it to be. Organized opposition to the ruling Left Front in the State is hardly worth any mention. This business house has taken upon itself the task of making up for the lacuna. Its anti-Left

convictions are genuine to the core, and it expresses them with zest and vigour.

The Bengali daily belonging to the fold, enjoying the largest circulations in the country, was livid at the report of Lenin's portrait adorning the sitting room of the new police commissioner. Is this police official a dimwit; worse, is he an adherent of the wretched, dated ideology, the final burial of which during the past couple of years has heralded the end of history? The newspaper, however, was willing to be forgiving. Perhaps the new police commissioner, in his anxiety to curry favour with his political bosses, has been slightly carried away. He could still reform himself. He must abandon his devotion to Lenin, a scallywag if ever there was one, who, leading a dishevelled troupe of crooks and criminals, was instrumental in destroying law and order in the great Russian empire, thereby setting in motion the most gory phase of human history, stretching for seventy excruciatingly long years. All is well that ends well though. What is history if we fail to learn from it? Instead of Lenin, the police commissioner should forthwith hang a picture of his most illustrious predecessor, Charles Tegart, on his wall. The present generation might not know Tegart, who, as commissioner of police in Calcutta in the late twenties and the early thirties, was a terror to the city's underworld. He had set up a wondrous example of single-mindedness in the maintenance of law and order. Men of his ilk, like Haley's Comet, make the rarest of appearances in the firmament. Calcutta was exceptionally lucky sixty-odd years ago, that the city's post of commissioner of police could be filled by such a stellar character. The new police commissioner, if he is concerned over the drabness of his wall, must adorn it with a Tegart portrait.

The newspaper is not an innocent abroad. It purposely left unsaid what constituted Tegart's reputation – or notoriety. Tegart's tenure coincided with the period when the youth from

Bengali middle-class homes, thousands and thousands of them, perhaps misguided, perhaps slaves of wild romantic notions, were on a devastating binge of terrorist violence. They were both totally reckless and totally fearless. Week after week, British magistrates and police bosses were shot, most of the time with unerring marksmanship. The young men – and a sprinkling of young women – who did the shootings were transformed into instant legendary figures in Bengal. Their exploits were the staple of daily gossip. Patriotism became synonymous with the successes and misadventures of these youngsters. The imperial administration was shaken to its core; its co-ordinates lay in disarray. Charles Tegart arrived on the scene at this juncture. He was determined to liquidate mercilessly the rabble of pistol-toting anarchists who dared to challenge the British Crown. He turned himself into the White Terror. His sentinels picked up indiscriminately Bengalis of a specified age-group, and subjected them to bestial third degree torture. Many were clubbed to death. Others had their fingers and toenails plucked out, or a leg or an arm broken beyond repair. Charles Tegart was torture personified; he prided himself on being the symbol of British imperial might, and British imperial savagery. No Amnesty International was then around to remonstrate with him. His hatred of Indians and Bengalis was altogether unalloyed. A few of the young men and women, who were victims of Tegart's savagery, happen to be still alive. They can still describe in meticulous detail the torture and persecution they went through when Charles Tegart was in charge of administering British lawless laws in the pre-Independence days.

But, then, we are either at the end of history, or history has decided to trudge backwards. Moral judgements have been rendered tospyturvy. Six decades, the Bengali daily with the largest circulation in the country has concluded, are about enough to obliterate collective memory. It feels safe to suggest

that a person such as Charles Tegart should be the model for the new police commissioner. Kick out Lenin, usher in Tegart.

The other matter one wishes to refer to is equally recent. Last month, the country suddenly woke up to the realization that the great stock exchange boom was a bit of a fake, as fake as the credentials claimed for the new economic policy. The transient boom was the handiwork of a handful of unscrupulous manipulators who were provided with unlimited cover by functionaries of banks and public financial institutions. It is hardly believable that these functionaries were taken for a ride. The protestations of the Reserve Bank of India notwithstanding, they—and/or their political master — were presumably recipients of hefty commissions; they satisfied the crooks playing god in the share market, and the crooks satisfied them in return. The racket was good while it lasted. Countless numbers of ordinary men and women fell for the temptation to get fabulously rich overnight. They failed to distinguish between a vision and a mirage. Even stocks of industrial units closed for the past dozen years, way beyond redemption, had their share value jump eight to ten times in the course of a bare eight to ten weeks. If there was heaven on earth, it was here, in the stock exchanges. Clerks withdrew from their provident fund accounts and invested the proceeds in share purchases; housewives hawked their jewels and did the same; they were emulated by the daily wage-earner who passed up a much needed meal to save money for stock market speculation. The bubble has since burst, share prices have tumbled, and legions of small investors are ruined for ever. So what, the Ministry of Finance did not consider these developments to be of important enough dimension. It moved lugubriously. Perhaps it was suffering from an ethical dilemma. Even if quarters close to it were not directly involved in the shenanigans would it not be infringement of the free market principle to meddle with the goings-on in banks, financial institutions and the share market? Whatever the circumstances,

intervention does not behove the true believers in free enterprise. Have a heart, it was a great merry-go-round— one could do whatever one liked. A small private bank, with a paid-up capital of less than half a crore of rupees, could issue bankers' receipts to the tune of 1,400 crore rupees. To suggest that neither the Reserve Bank nor the Ministry of Finance was aware of such breath-taking feats of derring-do is to fly in the face of facts. There is the supposed subsidiary general ledger maintained by the RBI, and the letter by its deputy governor to the banks way back in the third quarter of last year. The crooks were in the counting house counting out their money. They were actually helped by agencies sponsored by the Reserve Bank and the Ministry of Finance. The crooks were only exhibiting, at the empirical level, the spirit of *laissez-passer*. The bourses were sacred precincts, would it not be tedious to question the impeccability of their functioning? The nation, the authorities arrived at the view, would not put up with such behaviour; the Bank and the Fund — and the US administration which orders the Bank and the Fund — would not put up with such conduct either.

The Bank and the Fund are the major purveyors of a new morality. The old notions of good and evil are dead and gone: whoever could make the quickest, largest pile through whatever means deserved to be acclaimed as the national hero. If there were any lingering doubts about such a metamorphosis of the nation's morals these must have been dispelled by the huge, proud billboard set up at the intersection of Calcutta's two principal thoroughfares. The message the billboard carried had no ambiguity about it: 'Jabtak suraj chand rahega, Harshad tera nam rehega', 'till as long as the sun and the moon keep spreading their lustre, Harshad, your exalted name will be enshrined in our hearts'.

By no stretch an original thought, or an original invocation. The banal phrases were first heard at the time Indira Gandhi's younger son met his aerobatic death. Since then, it has been

repeatedly in use, borrowed over and over again, only the name of the individual to whom the apostrophe was addressed got changed to satisfy the requirement of the particular occasion. The chant was aired at the time Indira Gandhi was assassinated and again when her successor to the Indian throne, her elder son, was done in an equally grisly manner. It has now been decided to deploy the invocation once more, as ultimate tribute to the money-wielding, muscle-flexing generation of adventurers. The major-domo amongst the bulls instigating the great operation which involved together the stock market, the banks and the financial institutions, opinion polls confirm, is the indisputable hero of the uppity generation. The latter have updated the ethical code. Whoever takes the public institutions for a ride, cuts corners, makes a quick buck through the shadiest of means, is to be acclaimed as the New Emancipator. The red carpet is to be spread for him. Billboards, put up in the city centre, will proudly blare his name to the skies.

After seventy years, the Russian Revolution – and Lenin – can receive their comeuppance. After sixty years, Charles Tegart, who hated Bengal and India with a pristine fervour, is hailed by the doyen of India's and Bengal's patriotic newspapers as the deity to be worshipped. Harshad Mehta the buccaneer has emerged the other messiah. Morality can go to blazes; it is money-making which is the be-all and the end-all of existence. What was, till yesterday, right, is wrong; yesterday's wrong is today's right. Get rid of yesterday's men and yesterday's scriptures. It is a whole new ambience.

Therein lies a particular irony of history. Jawaharlal Nehru the aristocratic disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, thought he had a tryst with destiny. His patriotic goals included a version of socialism and the founding of a just republic where truth shall prevail. May be all these were, even to him abstractions. But in a country where a high premium is placed on symbols, such abstract ideas had a significance of their own. It has taken only a

quarter of a century from the day Nehru died for a sea-change to take place. Between his daughter and his grand-children, they succeeded in re-doing the package of goals. It is a great counter-revolution, no less awesome than the counter-revolution overwhelming eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Lesser ones such as the Subhash Bose's were in any case not in the count, but even Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru have ceased to be beacon lights for this nation; the Charles Tegarts and the Harshad Mehtas have taken over.

It will be churlish to complain. A few weeks ago, the death anniversary of Indira Gandhi's elder offspring was celebrated with disgusting solemnity. As prime minister, he was an unmitigated disaster. It is because of his decisions and activities that the country has stumbled into a horrendous debt trap – the inevitable consequence is the present process of step-by step surrender of our sovereignty. And yet on the occasion of his death anniversary, the pretence was kept up that this dimwit of an individual was in fact a great visionary. Perhaps it is not a pretence even; the chanters perhaps really believe in the essential message of their chant, he served truly and well their class interests. It should therefore cause little surprise that Charles Tegart and Harshad Mehta are now the heroes whose lead, it is considered, would be ennobling to follow.

JUNE, 1992

## THE PARADE OF AFFLUENCE

Should one apologize for returning to the same theme, over and over again? But when cliché is the reality, cliché it has to be.

They are the top of the heap. In their scheme of things, only the top, in fact, exists, the heap does not. One happens to pick one of those slick publications which deal, exclusively, with the perambulations of this set. It is gushingly information. India, it confides to you, has finally arrived; at long last, what a relief, it is the year of the designer. The influence of the designer, one is told with authority, permeates every – yes, every – sphere of Indian life; our compatriots, each and every one of them, have ceased simply to buy clothes, they now insist on buying labels. The labels of course have their price-tag, but, in civilized society, who does not know, it is not the in thing to mention prices.

Classy writing, classy name-dropping. Sons and daughters of the very, very rich design apparel for each other. They create wealth, and exchange that wealth, within the fold. It is a self-contained arrangement, where the offsprings of the affluent concern themselves with fashions and designs and such other foppery intended for themselves alone. They compliment each other for their creativity; one or two amongst them sit down to write learned-sounding discourses on what they have created. Foppery, they take it for granted, is substitutable with culture. Somebody from within their set they designate as the country's

premier culture persons; taking the long view, they even name his or her successor. It is such a cosy world of unending indulgence, as if those advertisements in the *New Yorker* magazine have suddenly come to life, eleven thousand miles away, along Indian shores.

These precious children have a new confidence in their voice. It is not merely that money-making for them is an extraordinarily easy proposition. It was always so for those who had the connections. What is, however, special is the assurance with which they now-a-days, almost absentmindedly, flaunt the fact of their holding money, interminable lots of it, which they are going to spend with a carefree abandon. Not a flicker of hesitation passes across their mind. They own the piece of real estate known as India. It is to them axiomatic that they are to enjoy the high life this ownership entitles them to. The pages of the slick journals they patronize, and which subsist on their patronage, are a revelation. It is a closed-circuit ambience. None is to be permitted to suspect that India happens to be one of the poorest nations on earth, beset by hunger, pestilence and squalor. The exclusive talk is around fashions and designs, you will only expose yourself as a silly old goat were you to try to chip in with that awkward bit of statistics about per capita consumption of cloth in the country today being even less than what it was at the time of Independence.

This is then the qualitative change which has come about in the past decade, more so in the past five years. The filthy rich of yesteryear have shed both their guilt complex and their fear complex. It is no longer shameful, they have come to acquire the knowledge, to parade their affluence. That the wealth of some of them has been amassed through roundabout means is no ground for apprehension either. A transformation has taken place in the perception of moral principles. Appellations such as 'ill-gotten' have gone into disuse. The possession of money alone matters, the modality of how one came by it is a footnote which must

not spoil the fun. There is a way of putting it; as the fascinated urban sociologists would say, Indians, meaning the Indian rich, have finally succeeded in getting rid of their hang-ups.

To offer the comment that the specimens being described subsist in an unreal world, and then move on, is hardly adequate. Rest assured their new-found confidence is not unreal. For the first time since socialism dawned in the country, they do not feel the need to hide their money under the bushes. For the first time, their holding of wealth has a major supportive advantage: it is backed by their direct holding of political power. Not that they were exactly lacking in political support in the past. But that was in the nature of patronage, dispensed by the powers-that-be for their own reasons. Such intermediaries have disappeared; the rich can now claim political power on the strength of their own credentials, and use that power with the same nonchalance with which they use the other perquisites of life.

This political strength the offspring of the rich have amassed is a concrete phenomenon. They do not have to operate any more through lobbyists for wrangling an import or industrial license or for getting a certain import or excise duty waived or reduced. They themselves have the clout to effect changes in public policy. Not that all of them participate with equal gusto in the direct political process. Sometimes the husband is involved, the wife is not. Sometimes it is the other way round. Or it is a brother-and-sister act, the sister is the political number, the brother is in designs. All told, they have not done at all badly. Some of them actually contested the elections and won thumping. True, a certain historical circumstance helped them to chalk up those victories. The fact none-the-less remains that they won. Also the fact that electoral triumph affected the most sweeping changes in the political arena. They have been quick learners. The legal and constitutional arrangements in the country they have inherited are such that a division of responsibilities is called for. They have accepted the fact with

grace that a handful amongst them have to perform dirty parliamentary chores, such as going through the motions of chanting socialism and placing on record from time to time words of filial sympathy for the poverty-stricken millions. There are minor irritants. Altogether, it is still a heady feeling: no bloody counter-revolution, no messy coup d'etat, it has been an amazingly swift-and incident-free-transition: the rich have inherited, in one whole lot, the duchy of India. There is nothing ersatz about it: it is a genuine seizure of power. They can behead you if they want to. They can, at the shortest notice, dispatch troops to rescue pals abroad who, either accidentally or by design, get themselves embroiled in trouble. They can strike an after-hours deal with the concerned multinational corporation and sign away the interests of the thousands who were felled by the gas leak at Bhopal. They can sign away the sovereignty of the country. Power grows, they have proved, out of straightforward inheritance, and, once that happens they can quite believe that they might even control the powers that grow: out of the barrel of the gun.

True, the foppery they are indulging in has a fragility of its own. It is dependent foppery, sustained by the country's huge foreign debt already comfortably exceeding fifty billion American dollars, and promising to rise at an impressively exponential rate in the course of the next few years. But so what? Those offering funds from overseas have every reason to keep up the act; India, they have satisfied themselves, is an eminently trappable tract and the decision-makers here have classy credentials. It will perhaps take us still some while to catch up with Brazil and Mexico, but both Argentina and Indonesia are within reachable distance. Give or take a couple of years, we are bound to enter the big league of external indebtedness, and will constitute one of the eminent threesome. The offspring of the rich, worrying their heads off over motifs and designs, need not entertain fears of any nuisance of a distraction. Their foppery

is heavily import-using, imports will however for the present be duly taken care of. Even the compensation from Union Carbide, in gleaming foreign exchange, will be put to good use.

They therefore exude health. They do not feel any moral pressure, the squalidness afflicting the rest of the nation does not touch them. In any event, closed-circuit travel from air-conditioned boutiques to air-conditioned cars to air-conditioned restaurants to air-conditioned penthouses can instill a great deal of other worldliness. Their friends from New York or San Francisco are of course impressed at the swiftness with which the Union Carbide was offered the helping hand. After this, there ought to be not one Doubting Thomas to allege that India is not safe for foreign investments. While their satellite links with the west are thus un-snappable, even the winds blowing from the direction of the socialist countries are equally propitious. Those wont to sing the International, on the other side of the assumed ideological divide, could not have stumbled on their perestroika at a more appropriate time. They and the children of our rich are, it seems, on an identical wavelength. Could it be the consequence of Chernobyl, could it be because these are characters in search of a place where they could dump their spare sets of atomic power plants? Be that as it may, it is a kind of global hook-up: whether it is Budapest or Moscow or Beijing or New York or Los Angeles or London, there is just one message: now is for now, live it up, live it up for yourselves, you are not your neighbour's keeper.

Notwithstanding such earth-shaking developments, there is that other objective correlate: the poor will not go away from these shores, they add up to millions and millions, and their number is growing: one of these days, they will learn to mobilise; one of these days, just for the fun of it, they will turn to organized mayhem; one of these days, for the heck of it, they will, suddenly, burst into the genteel tranquility or air-conditioned salons and make a bonfire of motifs and designs.

That will be some bother, which is why it is found necessary to set aside funds in the budget for distributing saris, gratis, to destitute women. And there is just an outside chance that the general elections due at the end of the year could provide a jolt to the offspring of the affluent. A few amongst them perhaps have occasion to glance at the opinion polls the slick magazines have fallen into the habit of organizing every now and then; stray motifs and designs are hidden there too. Whether the rich have inherited the earth for ever therefore remains an open-ended issue. Some designs may still turn out to be non-acceptable, whatever the 'leading culture persons of the country' may say.

MARCH, 1989

## SUPPLYSIDE ECONOMICS

Scan the national income statistics for recent years, how one feature stands out. The rate of growth in the so-called services sector – and this includes construction – is much higher than that in either agriculture or industry. This fact may, in the first flush puzzle you. It should not though. Where income is as unevenly distributed as it is in our country, the few at the top who come to acquire huge wealth will spend a fair portion of such wealth on enjoying life and therefore services. Construction activity too will enjoy a boom. It will be construction of a particular type, known in the trade as luxury construction: palatial edifices for the very, very rich, high-rise apartment buildings, ultra-modern cinema houses and theatres, private office complexes, construction of a similar genre in the public domain inspired by the urge to keep up with the private Joneses.

But you need land, urban land, to provide for this kind of construction. Demographic factors, and migration from the countryside impelled by the clamour for jobs, have over-crowded the cities and rendered urban land scarce. The demand of the extremely wealthy for sites to build upon makes such land even more scarce. Inflation – the depreciation in the value of money – contributes its own mite. Prices have risen 500-600 per cent in the last twenty-odd years, and have had an effect on land values. Along with gold; real estate is one thing you can escape to when money depreciates. Add these factors together, land in metropolitan cities is, worth its weight in gold; or perhaps even

more. The poorer classes are therefore continuously under pressure. Real estate moves up; rentals move up, and the poorer classes are forced to move out, enjoyment of the city lights is an unaffordable luxury for them. It is nonetheless the great call of the bread basket, they have to come to work in the metropolitan cities, so they travel in the morning, by suburban trains and buses, from twenty-five, thirty, forty, fifty kilometres away; in the evening, they again travel these: twenty five, thirty, forty, fifty kilometres to reach the hovels they have ensconced themselves and their families in outlying semi-urban concentrations. Were a little survey organized every five years or thereabouts, it would reveal one facet of hard reality: the physical distance between the centre and the periphery which serves the centre increases over time. As the message of high urban real estate spreads and ever spreads in concentric circles, the poorer classes are pushed further and further out. They have to travel, each morning, to the heart of the metropolitan centre, they service the centre, which will collapse without them. However, the laws of economics being what they are, they have to travel longer and longer distances with each year, and as suburban bus and train fares rise without any compensation to their pay packets, their real income keeps dropping further and further.

Difficulties ensue. You want your maid servant to report at six in the morning at your high-rise apartment. You want fresh milk and bread and fruits at the breakfast table. You want your driver to turn up at not later than seven thirty. You find it convenient to have a fishmonger or an itinerant laundry-man come round to your apartment during the morning hours. Umpteen other facilities you have come to associate with comfortable urban living are contingent upon the poorer classes being available, on tap, to wait upon you, morning and evening. A technical hitch arises. If they have to travel twenty-five, thirty, forty, fifty kilometres in the morning to reach their place of work and traverse the same distance in the evening to reach their night's shelter, the time factor begins to loom large and the services tend to deteriorate, affecting the quality of high living.

This issue even Plato was unable to untangle. Even in his schemata, the servicing classes, important but inferior, were physically located on the periphery; the quality of life in the planned Republic did lose some of its lustre as a result.

Consider also a more specific problem. In this society of the rich, by the rich and for the rich, with the boom in luxury construction, high-rise buildings must come up at a fast pace, real estate is gold, or even more than gold, therefore build, build, build. But, in order to build, you need construction workers, thousands and thousands of them, some skilled, the vast majority unskilled, who have to be perhaps imported from the countryside. While construction is on, they have to be on site, you cannot transport them twenty-five, thirty, forty, fifty kilometres or more every morning and transport them back the same distance every evening. Moreover, sometimes construction work has to go on throughout the night, real estate is gold, or even more than gold, you cannot afford to waste time, you must build in a great hurry.

So the construction workers have to be somewhere in the proximity of the metropolitan centre. The maids too have to be, along with the drivers, the fishmongers, the newspaper hawkers, other trades people. These days such people cannot afford to move in even into a proper *jhonparatty*. So they squat, they squat wherever they find an empty space. They set up precarious little sheds with whatever material they can lay their hands upon, skimpy shelters for themselves and their families; there is no water and no sanitation, there is no light. These people are however great improvisers. They are the ones who build these huge high-rise complexes, they are the ones who provide the basic services which ensure the smooth flow of life in the rich, sophisticated households, they know their way about, they know how to organize, on zero capital, a modicum of a system so that their hovels can come to life. The raw materials are sand, mud and squalor, but never mind, these are ingenious people, they are creative people, they weave an almost beautiful texture of poetry even in that squalor. It is rough, humdrum, ramshackle, thread-

bare, it is still poetry of a sort, this composition of haphazard structures they set up, without water, light and sanitation. Any assertion of life is poetry, and these hovels are no less.

However, these are unauthorized structures. They are set up without anyone's leave; that have been sanctioned neither by the government nor by the municipal authority nor by the private people who possess the real estate rights of the land on which they are set up. To the occupant of the high-rise apartments which the squatters have helped to build and which some of them now service, these structures are an outrage; they spoil their view of the tranquil Arab sea or the lush stretch of the *maidan*. To the city planner, they are a scandal, for they interfere with the impeccable landscaping he has so dotingly mapped out in his dreams. To the real estate people and the building contractors, they are a nuisance and a menace, they hold up essential construction and hold up the process of accumulation of wealth. To the municipal authority, these unauthorized structures are a major threat to the city's health.

This then is the crisis of supply site economics. Each member of the *dramatis personae* plays his or her assigned role. Each one could not be more right from his or her own point of view. Since the system creates a demand for luxury consumption, slum construction has to take place. If you want to prevent your metropolitan city from turning into an urban nightmare, you must plan carefully its future growth, you must have proper zoning and landscaping, you must provide for roads and parks and empty spaces. If you are a city planner, and have spent dedicated years in the job, you would be hard put to put up with the affront of these hovels. If you are a mercantile executive who, through your talent and hard toil, have scaled to the dizzy peak of a successful career and earned the right to enjoy the high spots of life, you would not like your wife and children to be distraught by the ungainly sight of the dishabille of families in *chawls* and hovels leading a sub-marginal existence right next door. If you are the municipal commissioner worried over the problems of sanitation and health, you would naturally

like to destroy the scourge at its source, and there could be no question of providing water and sanitation to structures which are unauthorized. If you are the individual possessing papers to show that you own the plot of land the squatters have occupied, of course you have every reason to rage, what is the meaning of law and order if you are denied the possession of land you legally own and have to watch helplessly while decrepit specimens of humanity occupy it by force?

The government, as the custodian of law and enforcement of order, feels conscience-bound to intervene and remove the squatters. The bulldozers arrive on the scene, the representatives of law and order make their presence felt, the chawls come down, families are literally thrown out on the road, they have not the faintest idea where they are going to spend the night. And yet, there can be no interruption of the cycle of birth, copulation and death; nature will assert itself, maybe nature too has its supply side economics. That apart, if the poorer classes are not around, all construction work will stop, severely damaging the real estate boom. If they are not around, there will be no maids in the apartments, no trades people will come round, no drivers will be available to drive the master to work. The rhythm of high life will be jolted; the crisis of metropolitan existence, a sub-species of emerging capitalism, will stare as much the urban planner as the real estate speculator in the face.

Perhaps, once high technology ensures 100 per cent automated existence, including 100 per cent automated construction, the poorer classes can be dispensed with, how blessed it would be to be alive in that dawn! But, meanwhile, notwithstanding the supply side economics, or perhaps because of it, the poorer classes cannot be edited out of the picture. They will make their presence felt, they will scream for their right to exist, they will demand shelter, they will refuse to move out of the improvised structures, without light and water and sanitation, they have built for themselves, they will, with a ferocious jab of their little finger point at the irony of the fact that, while they have, by the sheer dint of their labour, built these

luxury housing complexes, they themselves are without shelter and thrown into the street. They will demand sympathy, and receive some. They will learn to organize themselves, and they will resist, obstinately, attempts to demolish their chawls even while no alternative accommodation is being offered to them. And soon or later, this being a socialist republic where adult suffrage is enshrined in the Constitution, squatters, either on their own or through some external stimulus, will come to that awakening that they too could, with the exercise of some cunning and some finesse, flex one or two acquired muscles. None need be surprised if a few racketeers too crowd into the scene, real estate speculators as far as real pedigree goes, but in the clothing of protectors of civil rights.

A chiaroscuro of confusion and conflicts, the acceptable and not-so-acceptable countenances of this curious republic thus grimace at each other. The dialectics of what is acceptable and what is non-acceptable, which connotes what, render the air heavy. It is a bit like Locke's rude state of society, some have the veneer of civilization, others cannot afford even the veneer, the issue is survival on one's own terms. The nuances of this tense, ugly, tender drama is sensitively captured in Anand Patwardhan's short, beautiful film, *Hamara Shaher*, which is a documentary, and yet not a documentary, which reveals the apparently insoluble contradictions of the absurd society we have been striving to build in India. A doubt however persists. Is not the forthrightness of even this film self-defeating? By being so objective and convincing, the film, despite itself, acquires glamour of its own. So there is a danger that society will claim it. In the room women will come and go, talking of Anand Patwardhan, and pass on to the next item of gossip. The film will live and prosper, the problem it deals with will continue to receive the standard short shrift. Until someone, even more starry-eyed than Patwardhan, comes along and makes another short film.

## INFLEXIBLE INDIA

What is the hullabaloo about? The bride is for burning. If she does not bring in enough dowry, she is to be burned. If the husband dies, it again behoves the bride to climb the funeral pyre and be consumed, live, by flames, along with the corpse of the dead husband. Convictions and rituals converge. As that superintendent of police at Sikar put it so succinctly, have a heart, how could he prevent either, the act of *sati*; or the crowd of men, women and children subsequently flocking to have a *darshan* of the burnt out ashes of the young woman; they were hellbent on attending a holy religious rite; neither the Constitution nor the police code approves interference with religious practices; this is, a secular republic, not an insensitive theocracy like, say, Pakistan.

Much of the outcry which has followed the reporting of the incident in Deorala, that remote Rajasthan village, is homage to banality. We only cheat ourselves. It hurts the pride of some of us that such outrages can take place within our portals. One is not even too sure whether the sense of shame is on account of the happening, or on account of its being reported. Little reason can be proffered for feeling dazed by the event. This is no homogeneous, unified nation. There can be no homogeneity between the twenty-first century and the Dark Ages. The India of antiquity, where *sati* was an ordinary, every-day occurrence, exists even now, at this moment. True, it co-exists with a prime

minister fond of rock music, with World Cup cricket, with instant revolutionaries who can quote chapter and verse from editorial articles published twenty years ago in *Renmin Ribao*. Mutual tolerance is India's specialty, and always the most exciting export prospect. Live and let live is this ancient civilization's message to the world, live and let live, and allow the bride to be peacefully persuaded to climb the dead husband's funeral pyre; we have even an immaculate name for it: self-immolation. A magnificent temple will now be erected at the site where the event took place.

It is thus sheer hypocrisy to rail against the double funeral pyre and its aftermath. If government television can flaunt gross religious crudities in the name of depicting tales from *Ramayana*, why flinch from *sati*? These narrations from *Ramayana* have little to do with the propagation of any great, universal moral values. They preach out and out superstition and sectarian dogma. They have nonetheless received benediction from the highest quarters. Vulgarity and obscurantism have now the imprimatur of official accolade. Such being the case, it is only natural that crowds will be out to establish their prerogative to have a *Rama Janambhoomi*. This eminent character, Rama, could indeed have been drawn after a princeling of flesh and blood who stalked the heavenly Aryavarta several thousand years ago. Or it could be that the character is altogether imaginary, its principal vices and virtues a cocktail of lazy legends and hefty measures of poetic license. But once the fable has been blessed with formal, official recognition its hero cannot be denied a real-life birth place. The fanatics for *Rama Janambhoomi* are government blessed fanatics, they will have their way. They must grab Lord *Rama's Janambhoomi*, and, if the grabbing involves encroachment on someone's mosque or someone else's farm property, ah, well, it cannot be helped, maybe a few Muslims will have to be butchered, or a few peasants thrown off their land. This is all in the game of survival. In our clime, the twenty-first century can survive only if it

accepts the Dark Ages, the former must come to a deal with the latter, hence *Rama Janambhoomi*, hence the gaudy performance of *sati* by Roop Kanwar under benign official auspices in Rajasthan. The rest is dissembling of a low order.

It is simply not possible to get away from the phenomenology of inter-dependence. In the generally equilibrated system of multi-party parliamentary democracy, periodic elections, adult suffrage and India of a variegated, uneven texture, the twenty-first century cannot but be deferential to the Dark Ages. The Dark Ages constitute the vote bank. They have to be humoured along. But there is a little more to it than that. High technology and the pyrotechnics of Madonna are what fascinate the twenty-first century. That is the ambience the ruling classes are in love with. This ambience can be ensured and on a durable basis, only under conditions of untrammelled medieval feudalism. Such feudalism provides total cover for sycophancy and blind adulation, it erases the question mark against the principle of dynastic succession, it renders Priyanka Seva Niketan into the most natural of things. It is however contrary to the laws of nature to have a compartmental acceptance of the Dark Ages. No picking and choosing here; you have to accept the Dark Ages lock, stock and barrel. If you must have dynastic succession, you must also have in equal proportions the communal programmes and the seasonal performance of *sati* by the Roop Kanwars. It is an impeccable illustration of what economists endeavor to describe as joint supply.

And that is the only way one can try to sweep under the carpet the contradictions afflicting this absurd nation. Oil does not mix with water, high technology clashes with the actuality of a nubile bride climbing the funeral pyre of a dead husband. Few amongst us will, however, agree to scuttle the nation gifted by the British. The nation can survive only if it is recognized as what it essentially is; a patchwork, a patchwork of jingo passion and Buddhist, ahimsa, of bride-burning and super-computers, of

godmen and Zubin Mehta, of untouchability and the now-and-then uprisings a la Naxalbari and Srikantham. Try to pull away at some of the crudities of the patchwork which disturb your aesthetics or some of your other sensibilities, the whole fabric will threaten to come off. You soon learn your lesson, and rein in your urges. When a Deorala happens, you break out into standard condemnation. It is dissembling of a pristine order, and the honour of the secular socialist republic is saved.

For a while, activists in the so called women's movement will of course have a field day. They will organize meetings and, morthas, draft statements, write furious pieces in national and international journals. None of this will make a difference. *Sati* is not a social or cultural deviation. Far from it, it is one expression of a basic arrangement which sustains the political system. *Sati* takes place, just as communal carnage takes place, because each such outrage is, either directly or indirectly, backed by the authority of the state. The votaries of the twenty-first century cannot stay in power unless they arrive at an understanding be with the forces of the Dark Ages; they even need to invoke the spirit of the Dark Ages so as to convince the majority of the electorate of the legitimacy of their reign.

The fight to prevent the recurrence of *sati*, or, for that matter, the broader struggle for the liberation of women is therefore hardly likely to succeed if it is kept within the confines of what passes as a social movement, or if it is made an appendage of the folklore of man-woman confrontation. The battle, if it is to be joined at all, has to be against a retrograde structure of values fostered by an amoral state authority steeped in class bias. The narrow class alignment which has captured the instrumentalities of power in this nebulous country could not care less whether the rest of the population advance into literacy and improved living standards, or in fact recede further into pestilence, squalor and illiteracy. The decision on how the rest of the population is to be treated rests on the judgement of how the

denouement will affect the class interest of the coterie at the top – whether it will strengthen or weaken their hold on state power. This is cynicism unbounded, but as long as the formula works, the privileged few will continue to ride in luxury into the twenty-first century even as the vast majority of the nation is further pushed back into the Dark Ages. On all sides, the rituals will be observed. For the sake of form, one or two policemen are to be suspended; one or two in-laws of the bride who burnt will be duly arrested and prosecuted. The president and the prime minister will record their distress. Some writ petitions will be moved before the courts, demanding action against the complacent police. The activists in the women's movement will suddenly rediscover their cause, they will expend some more passion against the abstract male chauvinists; exhausted, they will re-read passages from Simone de Beauvoir, and be filled with noble thoughts.

Nothing of substance is going to change. The fire will lend an even greater lustre to the horizon next time; as yet another sati climbs the husband's funeral pyre. Eternal India, inflexible India. *Sati* alongside super-computers. Beat that as a combination. The world will watch us in awe. We should feel grateful, and sing the national anthem.

OCTOBER, 1987

### A DELICATE MODALITY

Neo-colonialism rides high, the media in west Europe and the United States have gone ga-ga, the phenomenon has to be replicated here. The pundits are unanimous in their judgement – socialism is dead. Haven't you seen the film clips Eurovision is distributing?

Young men and women in Rumania are jamming the dance halls, they are buying red wine in the black market, they are prancing in the streets, it is celebration time, it is the best of times. Socialism is dead, most of central and east Europe, barring Albania, is free. Soon milk and honey will flow in each of these countries. Meanwhile, there are victories on other fronts too. The United Nations General Assembly, (irony of ironies) an organization of American states too may vote, mechanistically, in whatever manner they like. That will not deter those charged with the global responsibility of holding the banner of freedom aloft from embarking on their occasional adventures. Noriega was a great hero of democratic labour when he was running cocaine in the service of the Central Intelligence Agency. Noriega presumably was running cocaine in more recent times too, but he is no longer a hero, he is a scoundrel, disputes have arisen over sharing the spoils. As long as those whom we regard as our friends indulge in the pursuits, free-booting and brigandage are integral aspects of freedom. A review is called for

the moment others try to crowd in such reserved areas, or our erstwhile friends begin to pursue an independent line of cocaine-running. Freedom is indivisible, but its definition has many hues. That, won't you agree, is the essence of freedom? Milton Friedman has written a score of books on the theme, freedom is the right to choose, including, (on the basis of the additional principle of trusteeship sanctified by that great Indian savant, Maḥatma Gandhi,) the right to choose what is good for the Latin Americans, the Africans, the Asians. They are yet to receive enlightenment; they, poor fellows, do not know what freedom is or is about; we have to tell them; we have to decide on their behalf; others must not be allowed to take advantage of their innocence; we have to show them film clips from eastern and central Europe. These Europeans were under bondage for forty long years; mercifully, they have been set free; they are currently celebrating their newly won freedom. Freedom is a vicarious experience. The central and eastern Europeans are feeling free; you too should feel the same way, in Latin America, Africa, Asia. These Europeans are now in an expectant mood; goodies, they are hoping, will, like *manna*, henceforth drop from heaven; the goodies, they know, are stocked in the capitalist west; they are accordingly, and very sensibly, crossing over to capitalism; Latin Americans, Africans, Asians should do likewise; they should listen to the advice tendered by their erstwhile capitalist-imperialist masters, recall them in cases where they were already despatched home, be considerate to the transnational corporations whose exploits really embody the virtues of western capitalism. In Rumania, Ceausescu was found wanting; he has been executed. What greater rationale do you need to establish the fact that Fidel Castro too should be found wanting, he too should be executed? Should you need any logistical assistance to bring this denouement about, why, just give us a call, we will fly our brigands in, they have major expertise in this line, they have done time in the Dominican

Republic, in Grenada, in Panama – let us for the present leave Vietnam aside.

Lenin's dictum, democratic centralism, has run into local difficulties in the eastern and central European countries; therefore, according to the extraordinary syllogism, the struggle against imperialism and colonialism must be suspended in Latin America, Asia and Africa. Leftists of different descriptions had been in the forefront of this struggle; they were, in any case, more than half a century behind; the rest of the world had long ceased to wait for Leftists. Did they not ever check what fate, on the individual plane, overtook Clifford Odets himself? Since socialism is being formally consecrated to the graveyard in erstwhile socialist lands, leftists elsewhere too deserve liquidation; a fate similar to Nicholae Ceausescu's must await those who would venture to plant seeds of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and similar abominable concepts into gullible Latin American, African, Asian minds.

Ceausescu was a hero in 1968, he refused to march into Czechoslovakia alongside the other Warsaw Pact powers. By the mid-seventies, Ceausescu, however, took a wrong turn: he was treacherously unreasonable, he did not believe in running up huge external debt with the western world; he prescribed consumerism, jacked up the domestic rate of savings, paid off the debt; he was quite unlike the Poles and the Hungarians who came to the capitalist west crawling on their knees. He had the gall to talk of self-reliance and independent development. He richly deserved being executed. The execution, let it be noted, was in strict accordance with non-Stalinist jurisprudence; so outrageous overlap was allowed between the roles of the prosecutor, the judge and the jury, much in the manner of the infamous pre-World War II Moscow trials or the Slutsky prosecution in the fifties in Czechoslovakia. Democratic centralism has run into difficulties in eastern and central Europe. Does that prove the end of the road for socialism? The party, in

country after country, could not strike the golden mean between centralism and democratisation; there were, in a number of instances, an excess of centralism and an inability – occasionally even a reluctance – to read signals from the grassroots. Sooner or later, the leaders not only lost touch with the people, they pushed themselves into abstraction, to pride and venality. The party degenerated, its hold on the masses weakened, it turned out to be an altogether inappropriate apparatus to propagate the cause of the socialist man. Does that negate the need to propagate for the cause? Does it negate the need for a social welfare function and a centrally planned arrangement in situations where resources are short and the majority of the nation has been socially oppressed for generations on end? Forget for a moment the social welfare function, which some wise western economists say is an impermissible concept. It is hardly a couple of years since the Seoul Olympics. The rest of the world watched in awe while the young men and women from socialist lands went on winning gold and silver and bronze, mostly gold, with near-monotonous regularity, in event after event, day after day. The outcome of crass regimentation, whispered the professional traducers. Was there not a little more to it than that? A socialist arrangement, as long as it remains loyal to its tenets, tries to reach out the opportunities to one and all, there is a conscious effort to meet the basic needs of the people; jobs are sought to be provided to all; there is comprehensive social insurance; children and old people too are looked after; families are encouraged to stay together; scientists, poets, dancers and musicians are provided with the funds and the stimulus they need to develop their creativity; millions of copies of the works of Shakespeare, Pushkin and such like are distributed at nominal prices; likewise Beethoven, Bach, Mozart and Tchaikovsky discs. We thus have to come back to the social welfare function. These miracles could take place because western economists notwithstanding, a basic social welfare function has been at work

within a command system. This system, because of its internal logic, permits no extravagance on the part of a select few; there can be no razzle-dazzle; the glamour of a product differentiated society is out. This is strictly in accordance with western economics though; the principle of opportunity cost *über alles*.

The countries which raised the boys and the girls who lifted the Olympic golds, however, were unable to shut off Eurovision. The Berlin Wall remained only a feeble symbol. The opportunity cost principle failed to impress, the concept of a socialist man failed to percolate either, the allure of luxury consumption did. That was not the only foul-up. The centralized command structure, which went sour inside the party, broke down in the sphere of economics too, and for the same reason. The issues have been juxtaposed, perhaps intentionally. In the stage of execution, central planning has been fouled up; that does not legitimise the logic of central planning. That logic is based on the criticality of the moral principle – each member of society should contribute to the social dividend according to his or her capability and receive back from it according to his or her need; both the capability and the need are to be derived from a social welfare function, with no stochastic or non-stochastic intervention from individual constituents of the community. The whole of society, in other words, is superior to the part; the latter, the moral principle says, has to abide, by the judgement of the former.

Whether this moral philosophy is good or evil cannot be judged by isolated episodes of failure of nerves on the part of the party leadership, or the, degeneracy of their scruples, in this or that eastern or central European country. There is a great deal to be said in favour of a society which lays the highest stress on printing millions and millions of copies of Shakespeare's and Pushkin's works and millions and millions of Beethoven and Bach discs and tapes, ensures blanket social security, provides subsidised housing and hospital care and keeps out drugs and

sexual promiscuity. Freedom, as defined even by apostles such as Milton Friedman, is indivisible: if you want to have the freedom to watch and read pornography, you then have to embrace the menace of AIDS as well, you have to watch helplessly even as the structure of your family crumbles and your children go out in search of heroin; freedom is indivisible, since the Leftists are against freedom and they are leading the fight against racialism, you have no choice, you on your part have to align with the regime in South Africa, support the cause of the Central Intelligence Agency, place the imprimatur of approval on the depredations wrought by the trans-national corporations in Africa, Latin America, Asia.

Democratic centralism has run into difficulties; it may, or may not, succeed in untangling those difficulties within a reasonable time horizon. Does that, however, disprove the notion of historical dialectics? Tomorrow will always be another day, the judgement today will depend upon what sort of morning tomorrow manages to push through the door. Meanwhile, the instant journalists, true to the nature of their profession, will crow over the alleged final demise of the cult of Stalin. There will be others who will in fact discover in the current events the vindication of Stalinism. The muzik from Georgia has been accused to cruelty, very rarely of corruption. He has been stated to be mean, paranoidly suspicious, and lacking in the ordinary graces of life. He was, in terms of such judgements, an unfeeling man. It all depends what measurements and criteria you apply. If, over the long haul, it is only harshness which can ensure for a system freedom from social exploitation, should you still stay away from harshness? What the Americans call Monday-morning-quarter backing is unavoidable. There is not much point in quoting Bukharin on superior alternative modalities that were supposedly available; Bukharin flip-flopped throughout his entire political career: you can vanquish a later Bukharin by having an extract from an earlier one, and vice

versa. Stalinism, if one would still want to use that expression, does not stand for, niceties. It is given to praxis. It is bent on lending a corpus to the dream of socialism. That underlines the need for both a social welfare function and centralized planning. Most of those in eastern and central Europe who backed away from these have done so on account of their own subjective deficiencies; they have little to show for their chicken-heartedness. They have not been able to speed up either general economic development or the supply of luxury consumer goods. They are, in the circumstances, finding Stalin to be of great use: their own incompetence they can now fob off on the reported misdoings of a man who died nearly forty years ago? They would have invented Stalin had he not been already a historical figure.

Democratic centralism is a delicate difficult modality. There can be no socialist society without socialist men and women to populate it; trouble is bound to brew if ideology lags behind. Frontiers of ideas are, penetrable. Should there be a failure of leadership – or a failure of nerves, a socialist system will be immediately under attack. Were a number of social and economic experimentations to super-impose themselves on the leadership failure, the confusion is likely to multiply. None of this however heralds the historical triumph of either Margaret Thatcher or the AT&T. The hack journalists may keep trying; they have yet to, establish the hypothesis that they have the capability to perceive beyond their immediate prejudices.

JANUARY, 1990

## THE DEVOURING OF A PROLETARIAN PARTY

Abdication can be bothersome, for kind Americans would want to commiserate in what they consider handsome manner. Thus when Edward VIII was made to leave the throne, and invitation flowed from Detroit to open the Zorine Springs nudist colony; there was another invitation to be mayor of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and, capping it all, the Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles, offered him a couple of million dollars, and a Hollywood mansion, if only the ex-king would agree to play the leading role in a stupendous historical film.

In Mikhail Gorbachev's case, however, it would not be reckoned as a bother, but the *summum bonum* of market loveliness. Four months of tough negotiations through agents, and the former president of the USSR has opted for a chair at Princeton. The terms which have persuaded him to travel to the eastern seaboard are yet to be disclosed. These must be far superior to the one million dollars offer from a Nevada gambling den. One million dollars a year, the owner of the Las Vegas casino had commented, was not a matter of jest, that fellow Gorbachev could not but give serious consideration to the offer. Gorbachev must have considered the pluses and minuses of this and other competing offers. Finally, Princeton edged out Las Vegas. In any event, to the once-and-over principal functionary of the once and for the present over communist party of the once upon a time Soviet Union, the Princeton assignment is small change.

Millions and millions of extra dollars will come from the ghost-written books he and his wife have already put out, and will further put out, in the US market. There are going to be, besides, television and video recording rights. It is a recession-hit country, but grateful Americans will neither deny nor disappoint Gorbachev. He helped them to ensure the demise, without the expenditure of a single shot, of the great Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, a task which had earlier proved beyond the pale of the Kolchaks and the Denikins, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, John Foster Dulles, and John Kennedy. Till yesterday George Bush had the reputation of a run-of-the-mill bush politician. All that is in the past. He can now justly claim to have pulled off this century's greatest triumph for western capitalism. He has to acknowledge his debts to Mikhail Gorbachev though. This man, who was the all-powerful general secretary of the communist party, the only legal party in the country, and at the same time the head of state, went ahead and banned, as head of state, the communist party. It was a virtuoso performance, well worth the millions of dollars he will now encash. A seller's market is a seller's market; had he demanded a few billions, that too would be moderation.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian republic, who loves democracy but prefers to rule by decrees, is having a difficult time. He has unshackled the market from the beginning of the new year. Now altogether unpredictably, chaos has reigned since. Prices of essential articles have jumped four to five times; availability in government shops has dwindled to very near zero; despite the hyper-inflation, or because of it, the black market is established as the only genuine market, only those with pots and pots of ill-gotten money can afford to bid there. Alongside the holocaust in prices is the threat of a total breakdown of fuel, gas and power supply. There is, as a result, a two-way breakdown of law and order: first, criminal gangs have muscled in with their guns and revolvers and taken

charge of the 'free', open markets; second, citizens unable to obtain essential articles of living have, defying the severity of the winter, joined the steadily swelling protest marches and have been indulging in stone-throwing and smashing of glass windows. In most of the fifteen republics which constituted the USSR, panic-stricken administrators and shuffling between total unfreezing of prices and partial re-imposition of controls. Their endeavours are not having any appreciable impact on either prices or supplies. Cadres of the communist party have resurfaced, demanding extra supplies in government shops, flaunting Lenin's portrait and singing revolutionary ballads. The turmoil promises to turn gorier with each passing day. If reports are to be believed, Yeltsin's principal adviser on market loveliness, the economist Yegor Gaidar, is himself about ready to throw in the towel. It is no longer a matter of after the deluge; the deluge is already there.

It is still of cause that matters, not people's sufferings. The erstwhile comrades, who collaborated to demolish the economic structure of the Soviet Union and initiate the move toward the free market, must be feeling as proud as Mikhail Gorbachev himself surely feels. An economic arrangement, which, notwithstanding a very narrow resources base, achieved a fantastically high rate of economic growth, created the second mightiest military machine in history, abolished unemployment from the country, set up the most comprehensive educational, cultural, health and social security arrangements the world has ever witnessed, provided basic consumption goods to the multitudes in town and country at prices that had remained unvaried for decades on end, went defunct. It was sold over the bargain counter not even at a giveaway price, but gratis. Ordinary men and women who reposed their faith in their leaders were quietly led up the garden path. The leadership abruptly went into reverse gear and chose to forsake socialism, for the free market principle, which, according to their strenuous

research, was superior to an economic command structure. It is a pity that the people would have to undergo privation because of their decision. That could not be helped; they have to answer for their sin of being the progeny of a wrong social order. The essential point to remember is, however, that, at the end of the current tribulations, (the people have to go hungry and workers have to be laid off in their thousands) are a small price to pay for the grand gains likely to accrue.

That future might well be aborted if the assumptions on the basis of which the market-lovers are proceeding fail to be borne out; so what, the Gorbachevs and the Yeltsins richly deserve the gifts showered upon them by devotees of Western capitalism; they are the architects of history's greatest restoration. Should the counter-revolution stick, it would imply, the ideologues on this side of the river will, argue, a complete reversal of the historical process, socialism leading not to the withering away of the state, but to a slide back to capitalism. What is dismantled in east European lands, it will be retorted, is not socialism, but a degenerate form of it. Such an interpretation, howsoever well articulated, will of course have few takers in the boudoir of ecstatic market-lovers, the proof of the pudding, they will roar, is in the eating.

The polemics will rage. And while their pole-stars are abolished, the goals radical and revolutionary groups particularly in the third world countries had set for themselves are not adjourned. The great Soviet Union has collapsed, but that does not transform the problems of poverty, under-development, de-industrialization and exploitation in Asia, African, Latin America. Neither Marx's magnificent dynamics nor Lenin's theory of imperialism loses its context, the fight at one end against imperialism and colonialism, and at the other, against feudalism and capitalism continues. In fact, these struggles assume greater relevance in view of the enormous strengthening of global capitalism and the consequential shift in income distribution, in

country after country, in favour of the richer classes. Nearly eight decades ago, a savant let drop the following comment: with the stripping of the conventional barriers and props of morality and law, bourgeois society becomes a victim of *Verlumpung*, which consists of the profoundest immoralities, namely, the exploitation of man by man. The collapse of the Soviet Union has meant the collapse of these 'conventional barriers'. Neo-imperial and neo-colonial exploitation is therefore bound to intensify in the immediate period, the Dunket Plan is only a preliminary indicator. Perhaps resistance against aggravated exploitation will develop as a natural law. It would be silly to deny though that the trauma of socialist disintegration in the Soviet Union will have a grim overhang, rendering the task of regrouping radical forces that much more difficult in many countries.

Soul-searching has thus to move to the top of the agenda. Should the chaos in Moscow and elsewhere turn worse, who knows, Boris Yeltsin too might join Mikhail Gorbachev in the American lecture circuit. Ideologues round the world will nonetheless have the right to ask how come specimens like Gorbachev and Yeltsin, who either cherished no communist belief ever or discarded the belief quite some time ago during a certain juncture in their career, could climb all the way up the party hierarchy – one became general secretary, no less, of the party of the entire USSR, the other was elevated to the position of the supreme party boss in Moscow, the nation's central citadel. Queries also need be raised on the reasons for the surcease of any effective socialist education in the supposedly socialist countries which formed the Comecon. Certainly the most stunning discovery by outsiders during the recent convulsions concerned the inability of the socialist system to throw up men and women imbued with ideology. The party, there is not the least doubt, had been allowed to slide into decay. The once great communist party was decreed out of existence last August, but neither the masses nor the militia rose in revolt; few

cared what happened to the party which had once bequeathed them the revolution and invested them with the honour and prerogative of belonging to the second most powerful nation in the world. There was not the slightest trace of either pride or devotion. True, the surrogate rulers who took charge did not evoke any admiration either. Of vastly greater significance was, however, the demonstrated show of contempt of the people for the party, the communist party, with which they were supposed to have indestructible links, for the party, if it were the communist party, was reckoned to be indistinguishable from the people. This assumed immutable relationship between the party and masses was proved to be fiction. The general abhorrence with which the party had come to be treated was not just because, seventy years following the revolution, the good life Nikita Khrushchev once promised them, the good life the Americans enjoy – the evidence of satellite, communications clinched that reality – remained beyond their reach. The factors underlying the disenchantment were far deeper. The wrath of the people was also not specifically directed against the Gosplan; the point of view that moribund economic formulae the desiccated accountants in the Gosplan persisted with were responsible for their plight had few takers. The social welfare function, or whatever one wanted to call it, was worked out, they knew, not in the Gosplan *apparat*, but inside the portals of the party. The party, the Communist Party, the party supposedly to represent the proletariat – which meant the entire population in a post-revolutionary situation – had in fact got totally dissociated from the people. It had turned into a den of bureaucracy, authoritarianism, hauteur, nepotism and corruption. It, in other words, was now an instrumentality which besmirched Marxism-Leninism and the red flag. It is inconceivable that the central command system, if it were transmitting the proper signals, would have failed to rearrange the priorities and improve the quantity and quality of consumer goods by cutting down the

allocations elsewhere; the signals were not transmitted; the party structure was too far gone: it was decrepit, insensitive, reeking of evil machinations, and, one needs hardly add, drained of all ideology.

Ideologues and partisans in the third world, even as they continue their struggle against feudalism and capitalism and mobilize effective resistance against the Yahoos who think they are the all-conquering heroes cannot afford to forsake the lessons of the east European tragedy. Things which went horrendously wrong over there can go equally wrong elsewhere. Are they sanguine that their past understanding of the tenets of Marxism-Leninism and its application was impeccable, and infirmities which afflicted the east European parties would leave them untouched? The essence of democratic centralism every one now admits, evaporated in the Soviet Union and east European parties, but what are the safeguards to ensure that calamity would not be repeated within their folds? The highest leadership of the party, the principle of democratic centralism asserts, is to be based on the widest inner-party democracy; while decisions of the majority will be respected at each level, the minority, as long as they adhere to the party's code of discipline, must not be crushed out of existence. Had the basics of democratic centralism been observed at every layer of the party hierarchy, the link between the people and the party could not have ruptured in the manner it did in the Soviet Union and the other east European countries. Was this a specific, localized default, or are there graver problems the ideologues must worry about? After all in countries where vestiges of the feudal ideal are still widely present and radical groups have to operate under conditions of secrecy and caution, the danger of utilizing the fiat of democratic centralism to cloak manifestations of non-revolutionary authoritarianism cannot be excluded. It is impossible to ignore the social base on which most of the drama takes place.

Does it not make sense occasionally to go back to the classroom of ideology, and re-learn from the old texts? It is not your or my interpretation of Marxism-Leninism which counts, but the context in which Marx or Lenin or others said certain things. Does not adherence to ideology itself demand that analysis and application of ideas are related to the milieu we are in? Marx and Lenin must be read and re-read, and there could be no harm in remembering the outspoken comments of that moody, volatile revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg. She did and said several wild things, but, strewn here and there in her texts, are several hints regarding how degeneracy could eat into the vitals of a proletarian party, in both its pre-and-post-revolutionary phases. The cultural revolution in China a quarter of a century ago did indeed go awfully awry, but in view of much of the developments that have occurred in the past quinquennium, should not there be some retroactive tribute also paid of Mao's perspicacity in inviting the masses to stir themselves and bombard the headquarters every now and then?

FEBRUARY, 1992

## WHAT ABOUT THE LEFT-OVER HERE?

**A**n anniversary of sorts, but few cared to remember it. The last week of August marked the completion of a full half-century of what when it occurred was considered a heart-rending event. The people of Ukraine had built, in the thirties, with much love and toil, the famous dam across the Dnieper. For months on end, ordinary men and women, both farm workers and members of the urban proletariat, old and young, some of them skilled, kept toiling; at the end of their labours, they had constructed this magnificent edifice, to show to the world what socialism was about. Was not the object of socialism to draw out the best attributes of humanity, their love and respect for each other, their earnestness to serve each other? Is not socialism creativity which transforms society, the collective determination which is making it possible to conquer the highest mountains and subdue the most turbulent seas? The Dnieper Dam was built by the good people of Ukraine, mostly with their bare hands, bit by bit, cubic metre by cubic metre, over the years. It was one of the earliest instances in this century of mass mobilization on a gigantic scale to create a major capital asset, a socialist asset.

That dam changed the face of Ukraine. The irrigation water it ensured led to the tripling of the republic's grain output in the course of a bare half-a-dozen years. The dam also generated close to six hundred megawatts of electricity, a lot in the context of

the times. The availability of this power directly contributed to Ukraine's rapid industrialization and the absorption of surplus labour from the countryside.

Adolf Hitler, however, struck in June 1941: wave after wave of Panzer divisions, wave after wave of tanks, wave after wave of Luftwaffe sorties. The Nazis knew their mind; the ferocity of their attack was intended to destroy Soviet morale once and for ever. The first few weeks were a continuous tale of Soviet retreat; re-grouping of the forces and launching of counter-attacks were still in the womb of the future. In that hour, the overriding thought was on the desperate stratagem of scorched earth; no tangible resources, economic or military, must fall into the hands of the enemy. After all, Hitler's eastern march represented a watershed; what was till then regarded as in essence an imperialist war – a clash between predatory powers over the division of spoils garnered through global exploitation – was suddenly transformed into an ideological war. Grant it to the fascists, they too were single-minded in their determination, they must remove from the face of earth all traces of the new humanity the Soviet experiment epitomized. Socialism was a dangerous creed; it preached the non-exploitation of man by man; it also preached equality between nations and races. Such ideas were antithetical to the concept and philosophy of *herrenvolk*, and must be destroyed.

Hitler miscalculated. The Soviet people would not accord him any *laissez passer* to destroy the new civilization. The aggressors would have to battle every inch of the way over Ukraine's land. And even if they take temporary possession of the territory, they would not be permitted to enjoy the fruits of Soviet labour. The Dnieper Dam spelled surplus grain; it also spelled power for industry. This grain and industrial capacity must remain beyond the Nazi reach. The good citizens of Ukraine had, a decade ago, built this dam, with much love, and with their bare hands. That creation was the necessity of

patriotism, it was the necessity of ideology. It was the call of ideology once more. They must now destroy this dam, again with their own bare hands. Which they did, within two months of Hitler's eastern march, in the last week of August 1941.

This August was fifty years from what was then considered a great tragedy, but which, as it turned out, laid the foundation for the grand design to defeat fascism. The anniversary went unnoticed. The Soviet people were engaged in an even more stupendous act of destruction. Forget for the present the apportionment of either credit or blame for what has come about. It is the act itself on which attention should rivet; its awesomeness could not but stump the historical process. At the end of fifty years, a fifty years packed with experiences of both a thousand glories and a thousand disappointments, the Soviet people have gone off to destroy not just one isolated dam; they, or those who guide them, have chosen to destroy the nation itself. No foreign aggressors have been around. Perhaps a handful of conspirators, imported from outside, were about; they could, however, hardly claim the glory of bringing to heel the entire Soviet system. No, the apocalyptic act was basically an endogenous achievement. A couple of months ago, addressing an open Western forum, Mikhail Gorbachev expressed hope for the day when a non-communist would be elected to the highest office in the Soviet Union. He had a dream; Gorbachev obviously knew how to fulfill the dream. It was a near *tour de force*; he walked out of the communist party, he ordered the banning of the party. The party had made him the president of the union. The party is liquidated; he, however, continues as president, now a non-communist, or, rather, an anti-communist. No Winston Churchill had to organize any private expedition; no broadside from an antiquated flagship such as the Emden at the port of Odessa. As the Americans expressed it so aptly, the Soviet people 'self-destructed'.

The union has ceased to be, and a new kind of passion is

abroad. Icons have to be got rid of. Leave aside those of Joseph Stalin, even the statues of Lenin are no longer safe from Yeltsinite frenzy. Satellite communications have been a great benefactor; the tremors of that frenzy have started to reach elsewhere. Some Calcutta citizens, overjoyed at the collapse of totalitarian communism, have woken up to the possibility of enacting the rituals of smashing one or two statues in the neighbourhood; that is their idea of asserting the brotherhood of man.

Getting rid of status is not in any event exactly a novel pastime around here. The left-over emotions from the days of anti-imperialist struggle had to have a catharsis in the immediate post-Independence phase. British statues strewn across Calcutta's *maidan* were a godsend of an easy target. But some sort of a sense of proportion prevailed. Before vandalism could really get going, the statues were quickly removed and tucked away in must museums. Nature abhors vacuum. New statues were duly installed on the causeways. The witnessing, courtesy the CNN network, of the great carnival of self-destruction in Moscow and Leningrad could not but excite the local copy-cats. The statue of Lenin, installed in a prominent corner of the *maidan* abutting the business district, a gift, a score of years ago, in relatively non-turbulent times, from the Soviet government, is their instant target. A homely reasoning is proffered on their behalf. Lenin's teaching and ideology have been repudiated in his own country; socialism, it is thereby proved, is a hollow prescription; it must accordingly be nobody's business to preach socialism any more in any part of the world. Since Lenin's status has been rendered into an obsolete merchandise, it stands to reason that it be dislodged from Calcutta too. Calcutta, who does not know, has always prided itself on its sensitivity to global development.

Concede the point, the convulsions in Moscow and Leningrad have at least stirred things up even at this distance of six thousand miles. There is once more a kind of ferment. Sides are being again taken on this or that side of this or that cliché.

One thing leads to another. The removal of the particular Lenin statue would, according to one set of activists, not only signify the rejection of outworn socialism, it would by inference, also provide a moral justification for demanding the dismissal of the Left Front government in the state. True, this government has won four successive democratic elections in a multiparty milieu. But this fact need not be regarded as of any moment. Objective reality is what proponents of a point of view decide it to be. The Lefties must behave. They must read the writing on Moscow and Leningrad walls. Or take into account the testimony of the current prime minister of Czechoslovakia, who, during his recent visit to Calcutta, was enthused to offer the statement that he could gauge from the city's state of squalor that it was run by a Left administration. The syllogism would, however, look equally distinguished if it were turned on its head: it is because of the quality of squalor forty-odd years of national independence have bred in this neighbourhood that it has fallen prey to Left ideology. Frivolities of this nature, however, are not to be put up with in revolutionary times. A resentment therefore fills the air: why cannot the local Lefties be as reasonable as Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin have been over there? This miserable lot of ideological Rip van Winkles were once upon a time inspired by the example of the great Russian Revolution. That revolution has now been formally declared to have been a mistake; has been decreed as defunct. Why cannot there be a similar act of self-destruction here?

The Left Front, despite all the ideological confusion, however, appears to be in no imminent danger in this state. As long as the panchayats are reasonably corruption free and the Kisan Sabha continues to have predominant participation from landless rural workers, small peasants and share-croppers, it would be difficult to defeat it in free elections. The fissures within the major opposition party, the Congress(I), render any such denouement even more improbable. It would have been a

different matter if the Government in New Delhi could be persuaded to effect a putsch through recourse to Article 256 of the Constitution, as in the old easy days of Indira Gandhi. That is no longer feasible in the post-Sriperumbudur phase. The Left Front Government is thus likely to stay on.

It is this apparent unfairness which engenders frustration. It even unhinges the President of the Congress(I) in the state, who doubles up as leader of the opposition in the assembly, is a past chief minister of the state and was for a number of years a member of Indira Gandhi's Council of Ministers in New Delhi, besides being a leading member of the bar and *crème de la crème* of the city's aristocracy. While attacking the left Front Chief Minister, he resorts to the language of the gutter. Whatever the reservations in other quarters, the Congress(I) leader is much applauded by the lumpen proletariat for such heroics. They are delighted beyond measure that at least this leader has seen the necessity to descend to their level. For the lumpens, this is tangible progress, and not the only one. A few months ago, one from within their own ranks got elected to the Lok Sabha from Calcutta's most sophisticated district, and was inducted into the union council of ministers. Lenin's status may remain undislodged; progress, however, is progress.

The Left Front administration is for the present reasonably secure in West Bengal. So too is Lenin's status in Calcutta. But a doubt persists. The lumpens have taken charge of the anti-Left emotions. What weaponry would the Left, however, wield for countering the thrust of boors and illiterates? Hardly any exciting fare, one is afraid. The Soviet party failed its ideology; it distanced itself from the people and shirked its principal responsibility to convince the new generations on the ennobling attributes of Soviet civilization. The Left over here has done little different, or little better. Fifteen years is a pretty long while; had there been enough by the control over the state administration, whatever the limits of its power, could have been availed of to

demonstrate the case of socialism as the most efficient paradigm for the poor to adopt, and exemplify the richness of the culture it embodies. No endeavours along such lines have been noticeable. The Left has generally remained non-interfering, and let sleeping dogs sleep. Even worse, in several instances, they have mixed up plebian-ism with proletarian-ism and sought to counter the lumpens by adopting their deus ex machine of the lumpens themselves. That, many apprehend, is the first step towards self-destruction; the would-be status-masters should not yet give up.

SEPTEMBER, 1991

### NO QUITTING TIME

Even according to the scale of the times, from Hotel de Ville to Bastille, it was not much of a march, a stretch of barely three quarters of a mile. Once a fortress, demoted to the status of a state prison, Bastille was obviously not being put to much use in the latter capacity either. It held just about half a dozen prisoners, not one of whom could be described as a 'Political' victim of the regime. The governor, De Launy, had at his command just about eighty-odd invalides and thirty-odd Swiss guards. Storming the Bastille was not any great feat as such. But once, on the night of July 12, Camille Desmoullins could not be prevented from inciting the Paris mob to arms, what was to happen happened. De Launy surrendered, along with his men, meekly enough. Meekness did not help; the law of motion of history had taken charge, they were butchered. Louis XVI, always a little dim-witted, was slow to comprehend the meaning of meaning. It was, he thought, a revolt. Civilities were breaking down. The Duke of La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt was rude enough to correct his king: no, your majesty, not a revolt, a revolution. He stumbled on the phrase, and the French revolution was on. It is exactly two hundred years since.

Bastille became the symbol. It always begins a symbol, whether it be a war or a revolution. And yet, in the relatively short run, it, to all appearances, achieved little for the French. The hatred, stocked up over several centuries, had to be out, there was

a lot of bloodletting. It was to begin with, a rising against arbitrary power; in its turn the revolution itself became arbitrary. Soon, it concentrated on devouring its children, Robespierre despatching Danton to the guillotine, and, calmly waiting for his own place in the queue. The Jacobins, for some brief while, flaunted both an awesome vision and an awesome demagogic. They too went to meet their destiny. Marat, one-half scoundrel and one-half ideologue, perhaps took the women in the revolution too much for granted; he paid for it. Whether, as Charles Dickens would like us to believe, Madame Defarge and the rest of les trecoteuses did in fact pre-empt those front row seats so as to be able to watch the sliced heads tumble out of the guillotine, remains, till this day, doubtful. But frenzy was in any event universalised, with little to choose between the mindlessness of sophisticated Charlotte Corday and the foaming at the mouth by plebian women who insisted on their daily quota of syndicated killings.

For the populace as such, the immediate gains were nonetheless illusory. Amid the chaos, evidence of tangible improvements in the level of living of the Paris slum-dweller was hard to come by. The aristocrats fled, but the countryside was invaded by shopkeepers and moneylenders from the heart of Paris. They had an eye on the main chance; they set a pattern, which was to be emulated eighty years later by the carpetbaggers in the American south. True, the Declaration of the Rights of Man was on hand. In fact, there were several versions of it; that busybody, Lafayette, was once more in an expansive mood. Between Bastille and the climactic of the Terror, it took just about four years. The frightened French bourgeoisie could not quite retreat into the bowery of old aristocracy. They, instead, took to Napoleon. Napoleon established one major point: no divinity attaches to either monarchy or aristocracy; any chevalier, in case he had the audacity and the charm, could build an empire. The French put Bastille in cold storage, and hailed the

pudgy little fellow who bestowed upon them the pleasure of his empire. It was another kind of a dizzy season for them: the thrill of foreign adventures, and the loot the adventures yielded, provided them, so to say, with an empirical correlate of the empire. Napoleon, besides, was a man of many parts. He straightened French roads, and gave the nation a legal system. He went to St Helena, but the roads survived, so did the Code Napoleon.

In due course, Bastille was rendered into innocuous 'social gossip, and little of egalite stuck to French society. It had other spin-offs though. The storming of Bastille scared the daylights out of the landowning plutocrats in country after country. It thus induced enlightenment on an international scale, at least on a European scale. The feudal set in Europe, learnt about the non-acceptable face of class exploitation: it was right and proper and necessary to indulge in plunder, but within certain boundary conditions. Inside France, between Bastille and Napoleon, the message spread: hereditary rights might or might not clash with human rights, it all depended on circumstances, hereditary rights were, however, purchasable, as purchasable as the ardour of a Josephine or a Marie Louise. This realization itself was a major milestone. It heralded the beginning of social mobility. Even so, at least nine-tenths of the population, as of that moment, got hardly anything out of it. The royal families of Europe ran for cover; they intermarried, thus forming a tight cartel, the upper layer of the bourgeoisie infiltrated, with alacrity, into the arrangement. They took most of the gravy, and in exchange provided royalty with ministers, generals, civil servants, bankers. The impoverished peasantry and the still-trying-to-gather-strength urban proletariat made another major effort to emerge on top in 1848. They almost succeeded, and the next couple of years were full of confusion. There is no such category as half a revolution, as those who slaughtered De Launy and his men had unerringly perceived. France needed the full span of another

twenty years, the discomfiture of defeat in foreign war, and the trauma of the Paris Commune before she finally succeeded to get out of the habit of monarchy. By then, the strongest emerging influence was of industrial capitalism; its compulsions rendered the French republic into what it became.

Are not the celebrations this month therefore a bit of a sham? It is in any case impossible to measure in isolation Bastille's historical significance. What the past two hundred years have bequeathed is a pot-pourri of Bastille, the Terror, Napoleon and, with a time lag, the grammar of bourgeois capitalism. True, Bastille started it all; the causality of both the Terror and the Bonapartes is rooted in it. Had the memory of the distant scare of Bastille riot been there, who knows, capitalism might have manifested itself in a much more malevolent manner. Perhaps the most important gain was encapsulated in a French duke's extraordinary instant summing-up. Bastille gave acceptability to the concept of the revolution. Revolutions, the point was established, are not outside the human system; they are to take place from time to time, quantities of a certain description will reach a nodal point, cross the point, and be metamorphosed into a qualitatively separate description. Once the integrity of this-statement is granted, Bastille falls in place: without it, there would be no storming of the winter palace, no Long March, nor the magic of Dien Bien Phu or Sierra Maestra. Since there is no quitting time for revolutions, and the stretch of two hundred years is a mere piffle, this year's celebrations are perhaps somewhat pre-mature! It is too early to judge, commented Zhou Enlai, what mark the French revolution would leave on human civilization. That comment Vias entirely in character: The Chinese are accustomed to measure history by the yardstick of millenniums. They keep furnishing the most up-to-date evidence that, while the rest of the world might worry; they are prepared to wait it out.

Is that not then the hallmark of a revolutionary, to wait and

wait until the hour is right? By celebrating Bastille we celebrate a memory, the memory of a point of time when the inchoateness of the mind turned into something more precise. There has been stopping of either ideas or praxis since then. The storming of Bastille marked, more than anything else, the freeing of man's imagination. Or perhaps the imagination was already a-boil; it is praxis, which took charge. Engels went back and discovered a peasant uprising in some remote previous century in his native Germany; while other poured cold water on the idea, he even went into raptures recounting the revolutionary potential of the English working class. Marx, a man of many parts, composed the communist manifesto and gave flesh to the theory of alienation; he also cast a sardonic look at the goings on in France in the aftermath of the Eighteenth Brumaire, even as he directed a fusillade of polemics against friends who would turn into foes by late afternoon. Bastille receded into the ground, but two separate formulations of faith embedded themselves in the consciousness of radical *émigrés* billeted in different European cities: (a) revolutions are inevitable; (b) you have to wait, for revolutions take place only according to a historical schedule.

The flamboyant Lafayette re-crossed the Atlantic and presented his friend George Washington with the key of Bastille; it now reposes, peacefully, at Monticello, Mount Vernon. That episode is, however, no more than a mythology gone stale. The ideology of insurrections and revolutions burns for ever, there is no physical counterpart to memory; Bastille, the old fort, had long ago ceased to exist. Two centuries later, at least a dozen boulevards converge on the Place de la Bastille-rue de Lyon, Boulevard de la Bastille, Boulevard Bourdon, Boulevard Henry IV, rue Antoine, Boulevard Beaumarchais, Boulevard Richard Lenoir, rue de la Roquette, et al. For the romantically-bent, they at present converge into apparent contextlessness. That too is perhaps an illusion: the kiosks and the shops and the cafe bars and the restaurants and the metro, the cacophony and the bustle

and the traffic, they whirl and whirl and throw a hint, the current vacuum does not necessarily indicate a permanent state of reality, Paris and France and Europe and the world are what they are because of what happened two centuries ago is a recurring phenomenon, it might replicate if not here, then somewhere.

The spot where Bastille once stood thus waits. It waits for the new opera house to be completed, but perhaps for other, yet to-be revolutions too. Meanwhile, though, there is divertissement: Simenon's unlikely hero from the Police Judiciaire, Superintendent Maigret, lives only a couple of lugubrious furlongs away, in one of those not-too-high apartment blocks, and several of the marginal characters Simenon is obsessed with lively shopping around, on Rue du Chemin-Vert or rue Boulle or Place Sajarnier. Every year on May Day, Bastille fills up, the PCF and the CGT march their cadres, the Internationale rents the air, creating an instant's illusion that perhaps the revolution – another one, following a gap of two hundred years – is a coming. Bastille is no longer there, but Bastille remains.

JULY, 1989

### A HALF CENTURY SINCE GUERNICA

Nineteen eighty six. A few weeks more and it would be exactly fifty years since the Spanish Civil War. Fifty years ago, as summertime descended on Europe, young people all over began to respond to the beckoning of their conscience.

Liberty was in peril in Spain; the fascists were marching, they wanted to demolish the voice of the people, they wanted to demolish the Republic and impose their perverse concept of 'order'. What was happening in Spain was atrocious; what was happening in Spain could not be allowed to happen; freedom was indivisible, if the light of freedom went out in Spain, it could be puffed out. As easily as anywhere else. Therefore the Republican cause in Spain was yours, mine and everyone's. Fascism shall not pass.

It was passion and invocation, it reverberated throughout the world, young people from far and near responded to their conscience. Auden's line became both faith and its assertion: *I am your choice, your decision. Yes, I am Spain.*

Young people joined the cause, they raised funds, they drove ambulances, they manned the relief hospitals, they smuggled arms, and they formed the international brigades. Many platoons of ragtag soldiers–amateurs, convinced that their lack of experience would be more than made up by their ardour joined the war.

Poets, playwrights, novelists, filmstars, theatre actors, pianists, painters, historians, economists, ring fighters, what an

assorted crowd it was that marched into Spain in 1936. They set silly, great examples of valour; they set silly, great examples of sacrifice and death.

Man's estate was never elevated to a nobler pedestal. Man's inhumanity to man too was never more starkly laid bare either. A La Pasionaria calling to arms, Guernica bombed into non-existence; a Frederico Garcia Lorca tortured to death; here, there and everywhere, reports, in lurid details, of carnage and bestiality which were the stock-in-trade of the Falangists. The Civil War petered out, liberty lost, democracy was vanquished, young people who went in to serve the cause could not save Spain. Many who formed the international brigades failed to return. Tomorrow the bicycle race, through the suburbs on summer evenings, Auden had said; but today—the struggle. That tomorrow did not arrive.

However, a defeat is a defeat only if you assess it within the formal span of immediacy. Over the long haul, the Spanish Civil War was hardly a defeat, it was a victory for the spirit of man, a triumph for the romantic concept that each one of us belongs to each one else. Several great creative works emerged out of the war in Spain. Even at the end of a full fifty years, a fifty years crammed with the Second World War, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the revolutions in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua and the daily possibility of nuclear annihilation, the memory of Spain refuses to lose its lustre. It evokes a kind of pride, reminding us that the estate of man is not to be demeaned.

The estate of man, however, continues to be demeaned in South Africa. A minority, constituting less than 5 per cent of the population, has imposed a savage rule on the other 95 per cent. This 95 per cent are condemned to penury, torture and death purely on account of their race and colour. The regime in that land has taken itself beyond the pale of civilization. Brute power, led by the muzzle of the gun, is the only currency it believes in. Every day, it shoots down, in cold blood, ten, fifteen or a hundred

people; it is almost like the daily weather bulletin, the killings have assumed the form of a droll, dreary ritual. The government commits murders; the government commits arson; it prohibits human beings from fraternizing; it decides what jobs the majority of the population are to be kept out of, and of what hotels, parks and transportation facilities they are to avail. Terror has been rendered into a synonym of law and order; the regime laughs at the charter of human rights drafted once and for ever by the United Nations.

From time to time, the United Nations General Assembly adopts sanctions against the South African regime. These sanctions are supposed to be mandatory for all members of the United Nations. They include an embargo on trade, and on transfer of capital. A large number among the member-countries of the United Nations have, however, not bothered about these sanctions, and have merrily continued to have economic relations with the marauding racialists. Apart from the United States, a major culprit in this respect is the Government with which we claim a 'special relation-ship', the government of the United Kingdom. It is a special kind of relationship indeed. We like the British; the British like the barbarous regime in South Africa. The sin of our friends, we assure ourselves, will leave us uncontaminated. Besides, we admonish ourselves, one has to be pragmatic in such matters.

Pragmatism consists of passing harmless resolutions condemning the Government of South Africa in this or that committee of the United Nations General Assembly or its Security Council, and then placidly reading in the newspapers about the rapes, killings and arson that go on in that country day after day. Why pick on us, haven't you followed the news, why, didn't we vote against the South African regime on each of the occasions, the matter came up in the General Assembly, haven't we declared that regime to be an international outlaw? What more do you expect of us?

The members of the United Nations know all the answers, they do not know the solutions though. Resolutions passed by the United Nations remain harmless. Sanctions approved by the body cannot be enforced because effective power rests with its Security Council, and in the Security Council, the United States, more often than not backed up by the United Kingdom, vetoes all proposals to introduce teeth in the resolutions passed against the South African Government; it also vetoes the enforcement of sanctions. Chapter and verse are quoted from the United Nations Charter to prove the point that, in regard to South Africa, nothing beyond what has already been done can be done by a government pledged to defending the Charter.

Leave governments alone, their conscience does not bother them. What about those who do not constitute a government and are not a part of it? In country after country there must be scores and score of organizations and thousands and thousands of individuals aghast at the bestialities being perpetrated in South Africa. Is it not time for them to band together, and start a crusade for South Africa? What prevents such individuals and organizations from raising funds in the cause of the suffering people in that land, and organizing the purchase and dispatch of arms to the activists there? Is it absurd to envisage the coming together of another international brigade, consisting of young people from the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America – and, if only they will, also from Europe and the United States who will fling themselves across the border and fight in the cause of humanity, in the valleys and shanty towns of South Africa? In this vast, wide world, why should it be difficult to assemble one or two hundred, thousand young people ready to march in order to liberate the oppressed ones and, in the process, if need to be, lay down their lives?

Running of arms and smuggling of combat volunteers in this manner will be irregular, did you say? It will hurt the susceptibilities of the United Nations and violate its Charter, did

you say? The United Nations and its Security Council watched while American troops overran Vietnam.

It watches the destruction of that country, it watches even as Ronald Reagan foams in the mouth and lets loose the so-called contras in Nicaragua. It watches when the same Reagan behaves in the manner of a sixteenth century pirate and gun-runner in the Gulf of Sidra.

Everyone swears by the United Nations, none with clout cares for it. In case the international body is unable to prevent genocide in South Africa, and the governments which are its members are either too self-centred or too pusillanimous to do something about it, should it not then become the prerogative of ordinary men and women, as part of the broader social contract which is humanity, to enforce the law of civilization on those who are violating it?

No, the problem does not lie in the moral or social sanction, it lies in the gradual deadening of our sensibilities. Citizens of every nation have their own immediate priorities. Young people continue to co-mingle, but they co-mingle for reasons that might seem altogether peripheral in the light of the spark which ignited millions of souls fifty years ago in the cause of Spain.

Idealism has acquired an unsavoury odour, they laugh in your face when you say that one is none, you are not supposed to die any more for other people's cause. At this distance of fifty years, in the context of the worries and concerns of today's crowd, it was crazy what those people did – the Audens and Caudwells, the Bunuels and Bretons, the Ehenburgs and Hemingway. Why must you fritter away your talent, resources and, ultimately, lives merely because fascists have gone on the rampage in some remote place or because some racists are indulging in genocide in that vague geographical tract, South Africa?

It is almost fifty years since Guernica. What homage should

one offer to Spain on the occasion? A scandalously romantic notion, this idea to raise another international brigade for marching into South Africa. Romanticism of such fanatic genre these days jars the soul. Even when you decide to rock for Africa, therefore be careful what cause you pick to rock for.

As to the Spanish Civil War and its fiftieth anniversary, why don't you chuck it, you should have grown up in these fifty years. Young people would not want to go building a perfect society – they would rather look for some pot.

June, 1986

### PIPEDREAM OF A SPECULATION

President George Bush could not be more forthright. In a civilized society, there can be, he said, no excuse for murder, arson and vandalism that followed the verdict in the Rodney King case. Apparently in a civilized society, there is still some excuse for the kind of verdict that was handed down. Civilization is to be defined unilaterally, in an altogether arbitrary manner: certain categories of acts and activities do not behove a civilized society; others, such as those perpetrated by the four white policemen in Los Angeles, with the judge and the jurors laughing away the evidence of video tapes, and the president half-promising an enquiry into possible violation of civil rights, are to be regarded as the epitome of civilization. We thus return to the parody of the Eliotesque cliché: after such judgement, what forgiveness? In the aftermath of the riots, President Bush has declared Los Angeles and its immediate vicinity to be a disaster area. He is, as usual, slightly off; the entire United States of America is a disaster area.

It has been the most serious domestic convulsion since the Civil War 130 years ago, and it will be, rest assured, henceforth a continuum. Every now and then, lives will be lost, eyes will be gouged out, property worth several billions of dollars will be burnt, or looted. The hatred and violence, besides, will escalate with the years. A supposed civilization which denudes itself of all

rationality and a minimal sense of shame cannot save itself from such a denouement.

Do we, from this distance of ten thousand and more miles, quite grasp the implications of what happened in Los Angeles and beyond in end-April and early May? The wrath of the black populace, denied educational and job opportunities for decades on end and subjected every day to a thousand indignities, turned not just on the whites; the lives and property of Asians and Hispanics too no longer belonged to the zone of immunity. All for a direct, obvious reason. The twelve jurors who gave the thundering unanimous verdict of not guilty, notwithstanding the most glaring evidence, and set the four white policemen free, were composed of ten white citizens plus one Asian plus one Hispanic. There was none from amongst the black community; were such a juror chosen, he or she would have been prejudiced. The Asian juror, reports spread, was of South Korean extraction. The Koreans, settled on the fringes of downtown Los Angeles, could not escape from being at the receiving end of retribution set in motion by the blacks. It was catharsis of a savage dimension. Once the fearsome hatred took charge, invidiousness was out. The Bangladeshis too were laid about. Come the fire next time, it would perhaps be the turn of the Indians.

At this distance of ten thousand miles and more, the phenomenon was encapsulated into snippets of newspaper stories and television pictures. Few comments have been composed so far on its deeper import or the causality underlying it. Consider, for example, the stance of the resident Indian population in the United States, now exceeding one million. Given the impending relaxation of immigration laws, this number is likely to rise fast; by the end of the century, it might even reach three million or thereabouts, a ten-fold increase in the course of a bare quarter of a century. Most of these immigrants from India have the benefit of a superior educational base. They have travelled to the United States in

search of the golden fleece. Their quest has been crowned with success. They have made it – their cup of contentment spills over. For them and their families, the waiting for the coveted green card was long and full of anxious, uncertain moments. All is however, well that ends well. They have finally been received within the precincts of the American economy. They have, they assume, also been received within the precincts of American society, that is, the precincts of white American society. By virtue of their professional background or their aptitude in science and technology, or the upper reaches of this or that esoteric social science, these migrants from India, (once the hassle over the green card is behind them,) find it relatively easy to enter into the top income brackets which few of the native blacks are able to reach. There are, alongside, those other Indians, businessmen and assorted soldiers of fortune, who escaped from Africa when confronted by the rising anger of the natives of the dark continent, whom they had exploited for generations. These Patels and Makhijanis had some difficulties at their first place of halt along the escape route. But, once more, all is well that ends well. They have found their haven in the United States. They have set themselves up in flourishing business activities all over the States. They have minted money, whether from running motels or from handling wholesale and retail merchandise. In income terms, again, they have climbed to the top of the heap.

The affluence of the Indians of either species shows in the manner they go about. They move into the exclusively white residential areas and gobble up real estate. Their black citizen who has done reasonably well in life, by dint of merit and perseverance, and has attained more or less the same level of affluence, will not be as lucky; he will be refused real estate in the white zones. The Indians and other migrants of lighter pigmentation can cross the racial barrier. The success, and thereby their primary exclusion from contact with the black citizenry, sets up a chain of consequences. The Indians mix with

only other Indians also with the whites enjoying similar superior scales of income. It is, from then on, a stylized milieu. Their children go to schools where they study and play with white children alone. Their week-end shopping is in marts where the blacks are around, but not even as shop assistants, only as menials who clean the floors or push the carts. Children from Indian families are told by their children: the latter are dirty, their speech is sloppy and ungrammatical, their manners rough and crude. Black neighbourhoods are to be avoided like the plague. There is a pervasive smugness in all this: we Indians must be very particular about our status in American society; our children must be made sufficiently conscious of the fact that they are 'brown', which sets them apart from the native black. True, they must integrate into American society, and fast. This integration, however, must be with only the white folk. In due course, the children would get married, or, in deference to current custom, choose to live in with partners; but they must get hitched with only white American boys or girls. Please, no Sydney Poitier syndrome, no scope of guessing who is coming to dinner. Entering matrimonial arrangements with the blacks is inconceivable; that would be scandalous; worse, that would be the end of the world.

It is not simply the newly acquired class consciousness entry into American society has made possible that is at work. To be fair, class barriers are not that rigid in the American environment. Once you have made good, that is, made pots and pots of money, you will be allowed to move up the social scale. It is the racial barrier which is insuperable. In the case of the migrant Indians, there is an additional factor strengthening the racial prejudice. The mental baggage they have carried from India cannot be wished away. Most of the Indians, who have done well in a professional or a technical job or in trade and business, hail from the so-called superior castes. Even though the locale is now the United States the varnashram continues to be

the central ethos governing the Hindu mind. The matrimonial columns in the Sunday editions of the Indian newspapers provide clinching testimony of the mores of the expatriates resident in the States. Fair, white skin is akin to belonging to the community of *brahmins*, black is the description of the lowliest of the genus, the *shudras*. The rules of the caste game are well known the *kshatriyas* and the *vaishyas* to break into the exclusive fold of the *Brahmin* set, and, similarly, shudras too, slave to the inherited inferior complex, aspire to reach the higher ranges of caste most proximate to them. The Indians, once they arrive in the States, follow the rationality of the *varnashram*. It is not the first time in history that this has happened. Sixty years ago, resident Indians in Hitler's Germany tried to curry favour with the Nazis: the latter must be kind to them; they too were, after all, Aryans, only somewhat bronzed off, living a couple of thousand years or more under the tropical sun has given them one or two extra coatings of tan; they were nonetheless as enthusiastic standard bearers of the philosophy embedded in the swastika as the Nazis themselves were; just consider the closeness of the German language to classical Sanskrit. An identical behavioural process is at work in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and Houston: we Indians, who have made good in the States are the *crème de la crème* of the varnashram system back home; we belong to the superior castes; our own instinct tells us that the blacks do not quite belong: despite the so-called Civil Rights Revolution of 1954 and all that crap, the blacks are richly deserving of a segregated, caged in existence. It is with a tinge of pride that Indians settled in the United States will inform, in confidence, the white, affluent American householder, their next-door neighbour, that they vote for the straight Republican ticker, Ronald Reagan was the man after their heart.

Of late, their ego is much puffed up for yet another reason. They are the non-resident Indians the government of India is running after. The Bolsheviks have lost even in their own

backyard: the New Delhi administration, which had, over the past silly wasted forty-odd years, experimented with some wild variant of bolshevism, has come to its senses. It has finally admitted the superiority of the American dream, and begun to pay proper homage to the invincible power of the American concept of all-out love for the market. The worth of the NRIs has at long last been recognized in the land they have contemptuously and despairingly left behind. The wealth they have accumulated under the free, open sky of the great United States of America is now avidly sought by the Government of India. A feeling of immense satisfaction descends on the psyche: we, the NRIs, constitute a superior tribe, the envy of the nation we have chosen to forsake.

This feeling distorts their perspective further on American soil. What commenced as an auto-suggestion has transformed itself into an obsession; be superior, feel superior, think superior. From this, it is but one short stop to the next tube station: be white, feel white, think white.

If you have already started to consider yourselves as belonging to the white species, little reason exists for the native blacks not to take you at your face value. The next occasion the conflagration engulfs the United States, the Indians will be placed in the same slot as the whites, their home and stones too will be the target of some magnificent liberating arson, they too will be victims of merciless physical assaults, and at the receiving end of the same undiluted hate that is directed at the white population.

As the United States loses its technological war to Japan, its economy will shrink, job opportunities will drop, scams and scandals, involving both money and conventional morals, will multiply, social tension will intensify. Children of white families, either out of the boredom of affluence or on account of the prospect, if not the direct experience, of a reversal of this affluence, will take to drugs or to weird suicidal cults; the

children from Indian households will tenaciously follow their example. Meanwhile the minority black community, benefit of wealth but possessing enormous physical power and the courage which comes from the confidence of occupying a superior moral ground, will frighten the daylights from out of the native whites. At a certain juncture, it will be full scale civil war, with no quarters either sought or given. Who knows, in course of time, the black militants in the States might even join up with the exploited long-suffering people in Latin America, Africa and West Asia. It will be touch and go, the culmination is totally unpredictable at this stage. Where will the children of our NRIs be in the midst of that war? Will they, faithfully, keep drawing water and hewing wood for the whites, or will they suddenly wake up and do some atonement for the sins committed by their parents? It is indeed a fascinating speculation.

MAY, 1992

## HEADS TRADERS WIN, TAILS PEOPLE SUFFER

The world is being made to pay a terrible price all because those in charge made a hash of things in east Europe. For some while, any outrage committed anywhere in the name of economic liberalization and the free market will pass muster. Memories, after all, have a short life span. It is because the free market was responsible for some of the grossest improprieties in social relationships that the role of the state in regulating economic affairs assumed importance over time. Collectivist measures, such as planning, attracted attention for the same reason. In case parties who encounter one another in competitive bargaining are of unequal bargaining capabilities, the market fails to ensure equity and justice; it instead provides enormous scope for exploitation of the society's poor by the society's rich. In such circumstances, the state has to intervene.

True, this slice of received wisdom has been put to some extraordinary uses. Consider a few recent manifestations in our own country. Children were once taught in their economics primers that, other things remaining constant, an increase in the production or supply of a commodity will lead to a drop in its price. That economic law has long been put in abeyance. The price of wheat, for instance, has increased year after year despite the output of the cereal also growing annually. The farm lobby has enjoyed exceptional political clout, and is equally strong in the ruling group and among the opposition. The state, it insists,

must step in and purchase a substantial quantity of wheat arriving in the market at pre-announced procurement price, and this price must be substantially raised each year. Whatever the farm lobby has insisted upon, the government has agreed to ever since the late sixties. The rise in the cost of production has been held out as the reason for the annual ritual of jacking up the price of grain. However, the increases announced in the procurement price, calculations indicate, have had little relationship with the escalation in cost; it is the bargaining power of the farm lobby – their political strength – which has been reflected in the marking up of the procurement price of wheat year after year during the past quarter of a century. That is the most interesting part of the story: it is state intervention which has enabled the affluent peasantry to enjoy the benefits of a continuously rising price for the wheat they have marketed. Had the government abstained from buying the eight to ten million tones of wheat it buys annually in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, the bottom would have dropped out of the market, and the actual price would perhaps have slid down to one-half of the announced procurement price. The state, the government in other words, has had its reasons for not allowing such a phenomenon from taking place. One such reason publicly hawked round is that depressed price would set back wheat production, and thus harm the nation as a whole. The hypothesis is not testable; none of us will be permitted to carry out an empirical experiment on the consequences of not raising the procurement price of wheat each year. Few have bothered to separate the supposedly economic considerations for raising the price of wheat from purely 'political' considerations. The distinction in any event is presumably not valid. The essence of politics is the furtherance of the interests of particular economic classes. In the matter of the procurement price of wheat, the interests of the different political groups have converged because they are anxious to curry favour with the same economic class.

Their reasons for doing so may be different, but that is of little operational significance. Their common focus has been on assuring the procurement price for the grain, which sets the tone, the mood, the ambience of the market. One can speculate endlessly as to why the pressure for state intervention for enforcing an increase in farm wages has nowhere been as intense in the three states mentioned.

It is all academic; even so, not absolutely irrelevant to explore the feasible alternatives for the affluent wheat farmer should the procurement price of wheat cease to rise from year to year. Could he put his land to any alternative use where the returns would be higher? The preliminary answer to the question is likely to be in the negative. Of equal significance is the other fact that, with irrigation assured for the entire year, the production of wheat is now freed from the vagaries of weather. Violent swings of output are therefore ruled out. The need to build a good stock in a good year, by offering a high ensure procurement price, is accordingly much less today than it was, say, two decades ago. The new technology in wheat farming has, in other words, largely obliterated the distinction between a good and a bad year. The harvest being predictable in all years, we have, as far as wheat is concerned, entered the era of steady output. Were the umbrella of procurement price to be withdrawn, there could thus be no precipitate drop in production. The political risks are, however, much too great, the free market experiment will be ruled out in this case. The free market will be permitted only if it enlarges the scope for additional profit-taking on the part of the nation's affluent. Where the prospects are otherwise, state intervention will not be dispensed with, despite Margaret Thatcher and eastern Europe.

There can, however, be no single paradigm. Cross over to the curious instance of sugar prices. Here too, that primary law of economics – namely, a rise in output and supply should lead to a drop in price – has been demonstrated not to be valid. We

have, in the course of the past few years, scaled to record heights to sugar production. The national output of sugar has now passed the ten million tonnes mark. No matter; as production has risen, so too has the price of the sweetening agent. So much so that last year, on election eve, Rajiv Gandhi's nervous regime was forced to make some emergency import of sugar: the price had kept soaring and soaring in defiance of the primary law of economics and it was felt that that might have some adverse electoral consequences.

There has been a change of regime, but no change in the modalities whereby the price of sugar is supposed to be regulated. In the decade following Independence, the authorities had introduced a system of dual pricing for sugar. The entire output of every sugar mill came under the government's regulatory order; releases from the mills could take place only under official instructions. How much sugar was to be released from the mill stocks was to be decided by the authorities. There was one clear-cut directive. Seventy per cent of the aggregate releases every month had to be via the public distribution system, that is, through ration and fair price shops, and at a price fixed by the government; this part of the supplies got known as levy sugar. The mills – and their agents – could offer for sale at the open market only the residual 30 per cent at whatever price the latter would bear. Since seven-tenths of the releases took place under official auspices at a fixed price, and the government could regulate the aggregate flow of releases each month, it was difficult for private racketeers to indulge in any major hanky-panky. The levy price stayed as the market leader; it set the tone for the open market price for sugar.

Unlike the affair of wheat, this was one case of state intervention which did not suit the concerned private interests. So, over the decades, a process of nibbling occurred. By the early 1970s the government was prevailed upon to bring down the proportion of levy sugar to be released through the public

distribution system from 70 to 65 per cent; the proportion of 'free sale' sugar thus went up to 35 per cent. This situation prevailed for a number of years. Although, as with all other prices, sugar prices too rose over the years since nearly two-thirds of the supply was being released through public agencies, the government did not quite lose control.

Winds of change, however, were soon to blow. Liberalization is a total concept, and the marketing of sugar could not for ever remain un-free. Surreptitiously, or not so surreptitiously, the government was pushed into abdicating its position. Changes in public policy are supposed to be announced in the parliament; in this instance no need was felt to observe this formality. Study the date on releases of sugar, under government orders, in any of the recent months. The relative proportions of levy and free sale sugar have been reversed. As much as 70 per cent of the monthly releases of sugar is now intended for free sales, earmarked to be sold by and through traders, and only around 30 per cent is channelled through the public distribution system. The government, in other words, has dismantled its regulatory role with respect to the pricing and distribution of sugar. From being the market leader, it has converted itself into a docile market follower. The price of sugar soars because traders of various hues manipulate stocks and flows. The government's response is not to assume control over the commanding height of supply, not to strengthen the public distribution system, not to take direct charge of the major quantity of the sugar that is distributed. Topsy-turvy economics comes to the fore. As sugar prices rise, the government announces that the quota of not levy sugar, but of free sales sugar, will be increased; that is to say, traders will be offered a larger supply of sugar which they can corner at their will. More sugar with the traders means so much less of the commodity under the government's own control. It is economics gone completely haywire. Traders, by manipulating supplies, raise prices. The

government's prescription for remedying the situation is to permit the same traders to have even greater control over stocks. An alibi of an argument is proffered for this outlandish action: once the traders come to larger stocks, they will feel constrained to release larger supplies in the market; once that happens, prices will begin to recede.

The traders, unlike government apologists, are not morons. In a milieu of continuously rising prices, they will regulate supplies to the market in a manner as will maximize their rate of return at each point of time. If the rationale of profit maximization suggests that stocks be held back, stocks will be held back, despite the government's generosity in permitting traders to hold augmented supplies. There will be, on behalf of the government, one final argument: bank margins have been raised, making it costlier to hold on sugar stocks, so it will be bad economics for traders to keep excess stocks. However, it all depends upon market trends. If, by holding back supplies, the rate of return can be jacked up by 50 or 100 per cent, a marginally higher burden on account of either margins or interest charges will not deter the traders. So what, if state intervention will help raise prices, a la wheat, the state will be made to intervene in the market; if, a la sugar, meddling by the state will depress prices, there is going to be no intervention. Heads the traders win, tails the people suffer. The lessons of east Europe will sink in, slowly but inexorably.

MAY, 1990

## THE RIGHT TO DISINFORMATION

A syndicated column from a well-known journalist a major newspaper used to take in has been stopped; its contents did not always go down well with the current pervasive spirit of market-love. And now, latest reports suggest, the editor of the paper was under such intense pressure not to present different sides of the country's economic picture that he has decided to throw in the towel. Some months earlier, there was a similar episode in another newspaper, but belonging to the same stable. A senior member of the academia, who had in the past held not altogether unimportant positions in the economic ministries and possessed a few other credentials as well, was contributing, at the special invitation of the editor, an article once a month to the editorial page of the paper. What he wrote was evidently galling to the votaries of the free market principle. After a few months, the editor wrote a letter to the gentlemen 'dis-inviting' him, on the ground that a policy decision had been taken that the editorial page articles would henceforth be written only by the paper's internal staff. This is not exactly true, other outsiders continue to write editorial page articles, only the don with arcane views is excluded.

Liberalization has thus heralded the illiberal hour. The press, mostly owned and controlled by tycoons dreaming profit-expanding dreams, must be under instruction to treat the economic reforms as absolute commandments; dissenting

opinions have all but disappeared from the papers. Going by the government version, duly backed up by the media, the economic measures introduced since last July have solved, or are about to solve, the country's outstanding problems: once these measures work themselves through, the nation will bathe in efficiency and technological delights; whoever opposes these measures, must either have his head examined or be ostracized. An unsavoury phenomenon is, however, ruining the picture; prices have started shooting up. Ordinary men and women are not overly impressed by the accumulation of exchange reserves or the magic the scrapping of FERA and MRTP Acts is supposed to usher in. High and continuously rising prices are a different kettle of fish altogether. Equally worrisome for them is the prospect of being bounced off from jobs as per the terms of the Fund-Bank conditionality the finance minister has dressed up as the national renewal policy. Ordinary men and women have therefore begun to discard their state of bemused-ness. Protests are under way, trade unions are promising fire and brimstone. Even ministers, at least some of them, are expressing concern. Machine politicians are accustomed to enjoying the loaves and fishes of office; they can read quickly the early warning signals of an impending rough season; they are in some danger of being deprived of their profession in case prices continue to spurt in the present manner and workers be squeezed out of jobs. The promptings from Washington DC notwithstanding, love for the market must therefore be reined in. The public distribution system must not be curtailed. Subsidies for food, fertilizer, transport, power, etc, must not be disturbed. The finance minister has been patting himself on the back for having quadrupled the foreign exchange holdings in the course of a bare seven months; why not use a part of these exchange accumulations for importing wheat and edible oil?

It is a confused situation. The organized opposition parties lack muscle. Still, they do not want to be overtaken by events,

and would try their utmost to persuade the government to slow down the tempo of reforms. As against this internal pressure is the reality of the polity being comprehensively globalized. Exogenous elements have infiltrated into the portals of power; they will not let the opportunity that has come their way be messed up. The government has been strongly advised not to watch helplessly from the sidelines while calumny is spread about the worth of the reforms on the anvil. A major offensive is planned against conspiracy and saboteurs who want to mislead the masses on the virtues and vices of liberalization. Left to themselves, the people, the government and its adherents are convinced, will not mind the price rise so much so long as there are not instigators around. These instigators must be identified and sequestered. Every member of the ruling party is to be called upon to counter the disinformation campaign plotted by the nation's enemies. The radio and the television will be commandeered to play a crucial role here; so too will the national press. All-India Radio and Doordarshan will rise to the occasion, explaining in the most succinct way why the price rise is not really a price rise; the press barons can be depended upon to order their editors to excise comments or reports that are market-unfriendly or frivolous; editors who are reluctant to co-operate are to be eased out. Liberalism is not for those who do not appreciate its boons.

It is difficult to surmise at this stage how far the government is prepared to go. Will journals and newspapers which persist in opposing official policies be cut out of their quota of imported paper, and denied DAVP advertisements? Will the tycoons ensure that no advertisements from their companies flow towards such directions? As during the days of the Emergency, will official censors be placed in position to approve of all matters going to press and whatever sounds hostile to or derisive of, the new economic policy mercilessly scissored out? Will the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act be invoked to

keep out of harm's way unreasonable individuals who insist on Article 19 of the Constitution, freedom of expression and other similar crap?

Does not Lenin's aphorism once more come alive: economics is distilled politics, and *vice versa*? The days of innocence, when one could quietly edit a weekly journal from one's little corner and write according to one's conscience, appears once more to be over. Who knows, the authorities, determined to crush disinformation, will perhaps put out a list of topics on which no observation or criticism will be permitted. Will it not be fun to try to imagine the contents of such a list? Here goes a sample:

Item a. None can mention that our current economic crisis is mostly, or exclusively, on account of the policies that were initiated by Rajiv Gandhi and his government; it will be taboo to state that it is because during this gentleman's prime ministerial tenure the country's foreign indebtedness shot up from less than 15 billion dollars to more than 65 billion that we are now caught in an external debt trap from which it is well nigh impossible to extricate ourselves.

Item b. No reference is to be permitted to the fact that Rajiv Gandhi did something worse on the eve of the 1989 elections; gripped by panic that he might lose the poll, he borrowed nearly 5 billion dollars of short-term funds in the international money market on inordinately stiff terms in order to import, on an emergency basis, quantities of foodgrains, sugar and edible oil for placating the electorate; the specific crisis in balance of payments last summer was because of the bunching of repayments on account of those loans.

Item c. The Janata government's folly was not that it did not go pronto on bended knees to the International Monetary Fund to replenish the rapidly thinning exchange reserves; its folly lay in not letting the people and parliament know of the horrendous state of affairs the preceding government was responsible for; its

further folly was not to cut back imports, in the severest possible manner, as soon as it got into office; its ultimate blunder was to continue with the same set of economic expertise as used to adorn Rajiv Gandhi's court; part of the reason for this is perhaps the fact that the prime minister in the Janata Dal government was for half the time Rajiv Gandhi's finance minister, and could not quite cure himself of the hangover of that experience. There will be total embargo on any of these speculations appearing in print.

Item d. Raising the level of the country's foreign balances beyond Rs 10,000 crore has been tom-tommed, and will continue to be tom-tommed, as a great achievement of the present regime. No newspaper or broadcaster or telecaster will be allowed to question this achievement, or to interpose with such comments as that the bulk of these accumulated balances have not been earned by the country but represent borrowings from the IMF on most humiliating terms.

Item e. It is *verboten* to mention in print that the aggregate foreign debt of the country now exceeds 75 billion dollars, which is close to one-half of national income. The annual, quarterly, monthly, weekly, daily debt service burden has consequently also kept mounting; this fact too must be kept out.

Item f. Industrial output in the organized sector has fallen appreciably compared to last year's output despite the near-total freedom the market has been enjoying. The censors will not permit this demoralizing news to get into the papers. The fact that exchange earnings from exports have also declined by 7 to 8 per cent compared to last year, despite the celebrated July devaluations and the 'exim' scrips, must also be similarly censored.

Item g. No snide comments are permissible on the commerce minister's suspicion that exports are not picking up because recording of foreign trade data has suddenly turned faulty, and maybe another essential area of reforms should be

with respect to the methodology of garnering trade statistics to ensure higher export.

Item h. It is prohibited to refer to the gossip that the Fund-Bank boys, ensconced in Lodi Estate, are going through the contents of the forthcoming budget with a fine tooth-comb, or to print such comments as that while, in the olden days, the finance minister's budget speech had to have the imprimatur of the approval of the prime minister, that prerogative now belongs to Fund-Bank

Item i. No further drawing of attention will be allowed to be coincidence of lines, paragraphs and phrases of certain reports of committees appointed by the economic ministries or certain policy decisions announced by the government bearing an eerie resemblance to the contents of this or that Fund-Bank document.

Item j. Interest rates in the United States, according to reliable reports, have touched rock-bottom while, in our country, they have been ordered to be jacked up to dizzy heights. Since what is good for the American goose is not necessarily good for the Indian gander, these reports are to be excluded from publication.

Item k. It would be outrageous to draw the inference that because the Americans and the Russians have reduced their defence expenditure, we too should do the same and divert the funds thus saved for purposes of development. Any such suggestion smacks of connivance with enemy agents, and should be duly censored.

Item l. The press must make no reference to the findings of the Reserve Bank of India and other studies which suggest that foreign-owned companies drain more foreign exchange than they earn for the country nor to the fact that demands individual multinational corporations are currently placing before the government suggest that they will expand their activities only if the stipulation about export earnings is totally scrapped.

Item m. No publication must react unfavourably on such 'requests' by foreigners as that all restrictions on foreign equity participation be abolished, the repatriation of profits be de-linked from export earning, and restrictions on capital goods imports for new joint ventures be removed. Nor should it be mentioned that all impediments on the acquisition of real estate on the part of foreigners have been removed within hours of the Japanese making such a 'request'.

Item n. Editorial writers must play down the demand of entrepreneurs from Japan - that once much touted land of small enterprises - that protection to small industry be drastically reduced; there must be no hint at all that Fund-Bank or other foreign advice had anything to do with the official decision to let the country's hundreds of thousands of small industrial units go to the wall.

Item o. The press must not discuss the mystery of the dip in production in crude petroleum in the country despite installed oil-drilling capacity remaining unutilized to the extent of 30 per cent; all references to the persistence of spot purchases in the Gulf area and of commission agency arrangements are proscribed.

Item p. No comment is to be permitted on the government's long neglect of any effective research on the technology of coal, of which the country has the largest reserves in the world, as a major crucial source of energy.

Item q. There must be no highlighting to the fact that poor, humble migrant wage-earners in the Gulf area have contributed more than three-quarters of the foreign exchange remittances during the past decade, for which they have received no extra considerations at all, while the contributions of the affluent NRIs from Europe and North America, despite all the special dispensations arranged for them, are less than one-fourth of the total.

Item r. The poor migrant workers in West Asia have

reportedly savings of around 20 billion dollars deposited in Arab banks; if only there are some overtures from our government, they are prepared to remit most of these deposits home. The source of these reports is suspect, and newspapers must offer no space to such airy-fairy stories.

Item s. The nation is going through critical times and any incitement to class antagonism is to be put down with a heavy hand. The media must play an appropriate role here. For instance, there must be no such irresponsible remark passed as that the free lunches the finance minister keeps referring to had not been enjoyed by the nation's poor, but exclusively by the rich, and the repast he has now ordered is intended to perpetuate the same arrangement.

Item t. All references to the ongoing food riots in east Europe are to be discouraged; these reports could put ideas into some people's head.

Item u. The media must not highlight the view proffered by some economists that an annual saving of Rs 15,000 crores in imports is feasible provided armament and luxury imports are ruthlessly slashed and the production and distribution of fuel are thoroughly restructured. Such loose talk of self-reliance is demoralizing and therefore anti-national.

Item v. The alumni of institutes of management and similar other bodies are to be encouraged to hog newspaper space, and to publicize their research finding that India's poor do not mind starving as long as they can install Sony colour television sets in their huts and 100 per cent silk Hathway shirts on their back. Any running down of these whiz kids will be a cognizable criminal offence.

Item w. The media must play up the government assertion that the present plight of the millions of rural unemployed is on account of the parasites belonging to the labour aristocracy sabotaging official attempts to do anything concrete for them; the exit policy will change all that by getting rid of these

parasites. No views refuting this assertion are to be allowed in print.

Item x. In defence of its all-out soliciting of foreign investors and transnational corporations, the government has been citing the example of China; China has apparently done the same things. Facts, however, indicate that the annual inflow of foreign investment into China is only 2 per cent of total investment in that country, and all foreign collaborations in China put together again contributed only 2 percent to the country's industrial output and 5 per cent to its annual export earning. The press will please not mention these facts in their news Stories.

Item y. There is an absolute ban on the propagation of the point of view that, in view of the crisis encircling us, we need not less planning but more, and we need to enforce further import compression rather than relax imports. Any editor supporting these suggestions will be cashiered.

Item z. Editorial remarks to the effect that the country is back to the days of the East India Company are banned.

We could have run into a little, local difficulty here because of the letters of the alphabet having run out. Fortunately, at this stage, the censor will intervene. The list of proscribed items is a confidential document: even the possibility of its existence cannot be discussed.

FEBRUARY, 1992

### A TIME FOR EVERYTHING

One must lean back to be fair; to suggest that liberalization has been an all round disaster will be a piece of cultivated astigmatism. It is a story of, till now, both shade and light. Consider the case of the media industry. Globalization has yielded it terrific results. What was, only about a couple of years ago, an annual turnover of a little more than Rs 500 crore, has burgeoned into a business which is reportedly ten times as much. Accompanying this has been a relative shift of emphasis away from newspapers and periodicals to television. Something of even greater significance, in the course of the past few months, the lion's share of television advertisements has transferred from the hegemony of Doordarshan to the satellite channels beamed through dish antennae.

The causality at work is easily understood. Consumerism is the crucial element, sustaining, at least intending to sustain economic liberalization. The major splurge in advertisements is therefore for consumer products of all descriptions, particularly of luxury items. The clientele for these products are not habituated to read. Literacy is in fact not the strong point of liberation-lovers in general. They mostly feed on clichés and one-liners.

Scan, for instance, the newspapers. Between what their

owners believe and what the government does, the convergence is 100 per cent; this country can be saved only if there were to be a total sell-out to foreigners.

The emphasis is on a lack of possible alternative means of rescuing the economy, and the nation. Such alternative possibilities are wishful thoughts, says the government. Such alternatives are pure fiction, echoes the press. Has the government, however, invited any amongst the non-conformists to propound their point of view? Or have the newspapers accorded the courtesy to ask those economists who continue to pin their faith on the philosophy of self-reliance to explain their position? The tribe of Voltaireans has ceased to be. It is not considered essential to provide accommodation to deviant strands of thought. It is perhaps considered dangerous to encourage thoughts of any strand. Hence the decision to stick to one liners and heavily, exclusively use official hand-outs about how the rate of inflation is falling down. Falling down like London Bridge and how surging foreign investment is soon going to drown us completely.

Television is the obvious ideal medium for beaming catechisms and one-liners. It is therefore not surprising that two phenomena are simultaneously at work: a steady transfer of advertisements from the printed media to television and the share of Doordarshan in visual advertising declining fast with a corresponding increase in the share of foreign television channels. The latter enjoys some major advantages: their reach is global, or at least continental, and they are able to add to the allure of the advertisements by suggestive deployment of soft porn.

Whether liberalization will succeed in lifting the economy and creating jobs and prosperity for the Indian people may be still an open-ended question. What is beyond dispute is its extraordinary social impact. It would be foolish to pretend a lack of awareness of the event taking place around us: the gradual

disrobing of inhibitions. Women libbers do not belong to the big league of liberators; they have actually made themselves irrelevant. Globalization has implied free importation of mores from overseas since the satellite networks are by and large owned by US interests. Indian products too are now getting to be increasingly displayed alongside dynamic images of undraped young women. This is an unavoidable cultural process; if Doordarshan has to stay in the business, it has to, willy-nilly, follow suit.

The transformation which overtook the societies of Thailand, the Philippines and Taiwan is touching Indian shores with a time-lag of 30 years. The market is sovereign and the demand for a display of female bodies has to be appropriately met. Far eastern societies adjusted themselves quickly to the market forces that spawned in the wake of the Vietnam War. The American demand for rest and recreation facilities was met to the hilt. Almost overnight there was a proliferation of massage parlours; auxiliary and ancillary activities too expanded at a furious pace. These proved to be major foreign exchange earners; the day was made for the economy of each of the countries. A similar turn-about can be expected to occur in our country. Every change has to have a beginning; with the satellite channels blazing the trail, Doordarshan will without question soon reconcile itself to the beaming of explicit details of the female anatomy: is it not a sin to ignore market signals? Once the ceremonial 'muhurat' is over, other things will start happening thick and fast, and soft porn will duly yield place to spicier varieties.

Those fighting the battle for women's rights will, one suspects, be in the horns of a dilemma; they will exhaust themselves trying to decide when is a liberation the obverse of what it states. We are witnesses to history; a great social revolution is unfolding before our very eyes. Its consequences are likely to be far-reaching.

There will, however, be some odd twists and turns. Take the current convulsions within Calcutta's by far the most successful newspaper chain. The past two decades have seen this business concern – a closely held family business expands its activities and profits—several folds. It owns as many as 15 newspapers, journals and periodicals, in English, Bengali and Hindi, dailies, weeklies or fortnightlies. It has not left any facet of the nation's society and culture untouched in the course of its empire-building activities within the ambit of the printed media: politics, the arts, children's literature, sports, cinema, market intelligence, gossip, general entertainment, literature, poetry, its clawing persona has registered its presence in about every nook and corner.

It has not neglected the arena of book publication either: a wide and growing list of Bengali titles apart, it has set up a collaboration with Britain's pioneer outfit for soft-cover publications. This venture is spirining money. Success breeds further ambition; the business house, well-founded rumours suggest, is now contemplating ways and means of crashing into the television industry.

For the past 60 years, it has owned a Bengali literary magazine. The magazine's circulation spills beyond the national frontiers. Wherever the Bengalis exist, in Fiji or Brasilia or Oslo or Noborigorsu, they are wont to subscribe to it. It has assumed the role of arbiter of Bengali literary tastes and cultural norms. The business house has indeed established a distinct pattern of market dominance. It would induce a handful of poets and fiction-writers to join its stable; those thus roped in will have their output published in the various publications belonging to the group. After a while, its publishing wing will bring out such writings in book form; the newspapers and journals belonging to the chain will publicize these books and shower them with favourable reviews. The books will sell; the authors and poets will arrive. Their celebrity status will be further confirmed by

the *deus ex machine* of bestowing upon them literary awards instituted by the business house itself. That will accelerate the pace of sale of books authored by the members of the stable. The mode has been meticulously followed in the case of all branches of literature, some of the arts as well as in sports and athletics as well. This newspaper chain has had its favourite political parties, pet politicians among the parties, poets, writers; academics, cinema and stage artistes, soccer and cricket players. It has, some suggest, its favourite bookies and punters too.

This family concern, which has, till now, not ventured, for whatever reason, beyond the printed media industry, has taken to economic liberalization as a duck takes to water. It has gone overboard in its praise for the earth-shaking reforms initiated since the middle of last year. Its love for each and every reactionary cause is well known; the Supreme Court's views notwithstanding.

It has strongly argued for importing into West Bengal the capitation fee. Not that it has done so in quest of any immediate or remote practical gain, but as an assertion of its theism: the market must be the determinant of all equilibrium, including in the instance of supply of, and demand for, education.

Liberalization has tripped it up, however, in a rather unforeseen way. The Bengali literary weekly magazine it owns, which has been mentioned above, was prospering throughout the entire post-independence period. Sixty years is a long time in which it is impossible to avoid the cultivation of some idiosyncrasies.

The advent of the prime minister with the mediterranean wife in the mid-80s ushered in the phase of all-out consumerism in the country. The business house could immediately scent vast new possibilities. Enough scope, it decided, exists for a fashion magazine for upper class women. The potential was immense. All that was needed was evolving the right formula: let the new

magazine be sufficiently high priced, let it use glossy good quality paper, it must splash colour, it must have at its disposal state-of-the-art composing devices, it should have on tap a couple of in-house graphic designers, it must arrange for a mixed grill, provide tips on cuisine, house-furnishing, interior decoration, tailoring and knitting, it must insert one or two 'confidential' and 'lonely-heart' columns, it should also serve some literary fare, carry half-gossipy half-newsy notes on celebrities and wannabes and finally, offer some, tit-bits of sex almost as if as an afterthought, under the cloak of physiological or anatomical notes from acknowledged specialists. Occasionally it must throw in an assortment of psychiatrists and social scientists too in this *pot-pourri*. Above all, it must pick an editor who will be attention-catching.

The formula was successful beyond imagination. The master stroke was the choice of the editor – a celebrated actress, originally picked by Satyajit Ray, with the right genealogical connections, who had acted in films, including multi-lingual ones, directed a film too, in English, which has collected several international awards, has occasionally appeared on the stage too. She had elegance as well as sophistication. The new publication, a fortnightly venture, created a stir from the very first issue. Its high price tag was no deterrence; it was a small price to pay for the fare it served, including, every now and then, demurely nude female bodies, its ambience gelled excellently with Bengali upper class decorum and lingo. The magazine opened floodgates of excitement and daydreaming; through the words and pictures it dishes out. It has seemingly made accessible a never-never world of luxury and sensuality. It was in some sense the Bachchan formula applied to the printed medium. The clientele in effect included not just the indolent upper class women patronizing the rarefied reaches of the luxury industry but also charwomen, fishmongers, clerks, factory hands. Starting out as a magazine for women, there were endless lines of men queuing

up at the news-stalls – buying for themselves, not for their wives or girl friends.

A fantastic success story. Still, for all this there is, for the business house, a flip side to it. Currently, the television channels are running away with the bulk of the consumer goods advertisements. The printed media has to remain satisfied with the altogether too insubstantial left over revenue. This situation is forcing the business house to think in terms of starting a television outfit of its own, maybe after it is able to team up with an A-I foreign network. Meanwhile problems have emerged which demand to be sorted out. In a dog-eat-dog situation, even within this lightly held, tightly administered newspaper empire, the squeeze on advertisement revenue is being increasingly felt; it is being felt more severely because sales are going up all the while, pushing up expenses. Here too, winner is taking all. The sexagenarian literary weekly is having a hard time, a large part of its erstwhile advertisement revenue is being spirited away by the more forthcoming, more uninhibited fashion magazine belonging to the group. A case of cannibalism amongst the amazons, and there is apparently no easy way out of the crisis.

The *diktat* of the market cannot, however, be flouted. The business house has now been decided to convert the literary weekly into a fortnightly genre, and arrange to publish it in those weeks when the fashion magazine is scheduled not to appear. The contents of the literary magazine, it is expected, will also be suitably jazzed up so as to enable it to meet the competition.

An era thus ends. The cognoscenti will miss the blatantly political, rabidly anti-communist introductory editorial article the supposedly literary journal used to carry every week. The predictability of the malice it used to spread about categories and men it disapproved of will also now be gone. However, as Thomas Hardy once remarked, there is a time for everything, a

time for kissing as much as for parting. The opening numbers of the new incarnation of the journal, gossip has it, will carry half-a-dozen jumbo-sized quasi-learned discourses on the global significance of Madonna's *Sex*. With it, it is being taken for granted, there will be suitable illustrations. All is well that begins well.

JANUARY, 1993

## IT IS THE LUCRE, STUPID

In the crowd of nine teams competing for the World Cup in Cricket, four were non-white. The West Indies did not make it to the knock-out stage, nor did India and Sri Lanka. Only Pakistan did. The Pakistan team included a few old war horses as well as some young colts. In the beginning, they did not blend well. The team was also dogged by injuries. The main Pakistani strike bowler, Waqar Younis, had to return home because of a back injury. Javed Miandad would pop in and out of the fixtures; he too had a long-standing back strain. Rameez Raja, the marvelous opening batsman, had multiple physical complaints, and had to miss a number of crucial matches. Finally, the captain, Imran Khan, kept playing through sheer will power. He was suffering from intense muscular pain in the shoulders; that apart, he is nearly forty, and his reflexes have slowed down. His bowling arm has lost three-quarters of its effectiveness; it was cortisone shots which enabled Imran somehow to stay the stretch.

The competition's initial stage was most disappointing for Pakistan. They lost most of the matches in the early round robin phase. Of India's two victories, one was at the expense of Zimbabwe, in the match interrupted by rain; the result was decided on the basis of the calculated run average. However, considering the manner they were batting, had the Zimbabwean team had the opportunity to play the originally stipulated number of overs, they, in all probability, would have vanquished

India. The Indian team's only authentic victory, surprisingly, was over. Pakistanis were out-played in all the departments of the game. Their listless performance lent credence to the belief that the team would scratch out soon. Certainly few imagined at that moment that the Pakistanis had it in team to fight their way back into the penultimate round, and, then, in that fantastic semi-final against New Zealand, win so brilliantly, belying all odds.

They confounded everyone. Imran Khan is a natural leader. While the team was faring badly in the early matches, the press back home in Karachi and Lahore – particularly in Karachi – started making snide comments on why it was expected of old soldiers to fade away gracefully. Imran's determination, however, did not fail him, nor was there any wavering of the loyalty of his colleagues towards him. Faith in their potential strength bound them together. Also a certain pride, which was priceless in quality, whatever measure you apply. If only they could cohere as a team, each of team giving his best, each of them inspiring the others to give their best, they could, they told themselves, still storm their way into the ultimate rounds. Which they did. The New Zealanders had won, comfortably, over each of the other seven competing teams, including England, which some had adjudged as the best of the lot. In their final fixture of the round robin format, they were, however, crushed by Pakistan; a scintillating unbeaten century by Ramiz Raja, and some devastating bowling by Wasim Akram and Mushtaq Ahmed and Pakistan were through. A couple of days later was the repeat match with New Zealand, in what will henceforth be reckoned as one of the greatest one-day matches ever played. The sagacity of Javed Miandad, who kept his cool through the critical final overs, and the brilliance of the nonchalant wielding of the willow by that young colt, Inzamam-ul-Haq, will remain etched in memory for years on end.

The Indian team fell by the wayside, much earlier, without even making a squeak. The moody West Indians are still in the

process of building anew their team now that the era of Viv Richards, Gordon Greenidge, Malcolm Marshall and the other greats is over; the side they fielded lacked both experience and stamina. The Sri Lankans as their manager put it so succinctly, preferred to play some variety of village green cricket: charming and attractive in patches, but they never dug themselves in, their temperament was much too brittle.

In this milieu, the Pakistanis saved the honour of the third world. Going by its inception, cricket is a colonial game par excellence. The West Indians were the first to prove how, even in this supposedly imperial game, the scales could be reversed completely, and the whites made to kiss the dust. During the entire post-World War II period, the performance of the non-white countries playing cricket moved along a consistently rising curve. On several occasions, the test series between the all-conquering West Indies and one of the lily-white Commonwealth teams such as England or Australia resulted in a total 'black-wash'. This was in fact one major factor which hastened racial integration within the former colonial side. England, for example, learnt the lesson that, to counter the genius of coloured cricketers from say, the West Indies, they must take in a few cricketers from the migrant coloured populations; it would also be a good educational process if one or two West Indians or Pakistanis or Indians were invited to play in the county, cricket championship as members of this or that team. This is how the opportunity came the way of the Lewises and the de Freiteses to be picked for the English test team, a long, long millennium away from the time which scandalized the prime Thatcher-minded Britons: how could a Raman Subba Rao and a Basil D'Oliveria, out and out blackies if one were to trace their ancestry even perfunctorily, ever represent England?

Those hoity-toity days are gone and hurried. Especially to the West Indians cricket is currently like home grown coconut water and home brewed rum. Without the presence of the

'coloured' teams, cricket, everyone now accepts, will lose most of its savour. The West Indians prove themselves equally adept at the limited-overs one-day games. On the introduction of the World Cup competition, their team lifted the Cup on the first two occasions, in 1975 and 1979. In 1983, what a pleasant surprise, it was India's turn to show that while they all along possessed the latent skill, only if they could add to it some grit, they too could emerge champions in a game which was once the white man's preserve. The wheels of fortune turned a little in 1987 when India and Pakistan jointly hosted the World Cup: their sides were favourites to enter the final, but England and Australia beat them to the post. Even so, some doubts persist whether, on overall form, Pakistan, if not India, had not the best team in the competition.

In this year's World Cup contests, however, teams from the non-white countries – South Africa is still quintessentially white – failed to come into serious reckoning. The speculation about likely finalist concentrated on the white Commonwealth teams. The Australians were the initial favourites, but then petered out. England and New Zealand stayed the course. Right from their first matches, they led from the front, winning game after game with a rare consistency. Both teams reached the semi-finals with astonishing ease. An even greater surprise, those rookies, the South Africans – who were permitted re-entry into the international cricket arena following the understanding reached between the Pretoria administration and the African National Congress – also succeeded in reaching the semi-finals. Which would be the fourth team to make the semi-final grade was a toss-up till the very end. Not West Indies, not India nor Sri Lanka, it was Pakistan who made it, making the proportion of the white to the non-white sides at the knock-out stage 3:1. The honour of the non-white contingents was already partly salvaged; Pakistan's blazing victory in the semi-final has now ensured the full salvaging of that honour. These lines are being

written on the eve of the final scheduled for Wednesday, 25 March. Should Pakistan fail to lift the Cup, at least the cricket-playing non-white nations would still have the satisfaction that, in the final battle for the Cup, they did not go altogether unrepresented, and in any event Pakistan had already managed to hold aloft the flag of the third world.

This is precisely why the reaction in the Indian media is so puzzling. There should have been celebratory epistles composed on Pakistan's success. Our team caved in, but, never mind, the Pakistanis have partly atoned for our failure, they have given the whites some extra cause for concern; who knows, with luck, the Pakistanis might pull it off and bring the Cup to the subcontinent. Would not that be wonderful, especially in the light of the disappointment in 1987, would not such an achievement instill in our own boys the confidence that, while they did not succeed this time, there will be in future other challenges for them to surmount: if only they applied themselves, worked hard and with dedication, did adequate justice to their talent, major successes would visit them too. In the political arena, we have no question a few little local difficulties with Pakistan. This is, however, not the occasion to rake those up. Rather, we should be delirious with joy because of Pakistan's success, and convey our warmest felicitations to Imran Khan and his team-mates. We are in it together, brothers; the baton that slipped from our grip the Pakistanis picked up, they ran the stretch, and beat the east of the crowd. The superior-sounding whites have been put in their place. By showering accolades on the Pakistanis in this manner, we would in fact be indirectly invoking our own latent powers. The West Indians did it in 1975 and 1979. We did it in 1983. The Pakistanis are on the verge of repeating our success nine years later. There is, let everybody know, no stopping the third world.

Alas, neither the Indian newspapers nor cricket veterans indulging in the privilege of writing syndicated columns have

been charitable enough to express sentiments along these lines. Barring a few exceptions, the comments are uniformly surly. As if the Pakistan team has achieved a sneaky success; as if, much more than on account of their own capability, it is the inexplicable failure of the Australian, or the fuzzy nature of performance on the part of the West Indies team, or the decision of the New Zealander to concede the match to the Pakistanis because they wanted to avoid playing the semi-final in Sydney against the Australians as their probable adversaries, which catapulted the Pakistanis to the semi-finals. As if the great semi-final which the Pakistanis have just won against New Zealand is also nothing to write home about. As if Pakistan did not really deserve it, as if Imran Khan's inspiring leadership, Aaqib's mustard-sharp bowling, Inzamam-ul-Haq and Rameez Raja's magnificent batting, Javed's meticulous strategy in the field, none of these is worth a brass farthing. Yes, the Pakistanis have slipped into the final, but, going by the comments published in the Indian press, their advance compares with the perambulations of the Testament-described thieves in the night. There is not one mention of the fact that while others fumbled and stumbled, the Pakistanis succeeded in reminding the inscribers of the record books the third world cannot be wished away.

Is it just the narrowing of the mental horizon which events since the 1940s have caused, and which is responsible for a curious structure of syllogism according to which any Pakistani achievement is identified as a major Indian setback? Conceivably there is a bit more to it. Indians too are not lacking in competitive élan, they too hanker after success. It is, however, a very specific kind of success they are after. They, like normal human beings, are not averse to the allurements of fame and glory which are joint products of success in competitive games. But such fame and glory are, to many amongst them, no more than a conduit, a conduit to the earning of lucre, lots and lots lucre. Once a solid sporting success is achieved, money starts

flowing in from different directions. The bank accounts as well as unaccounted funds accruing not only to the players swell, others too bask in the achievement, including journalists, broadcasters, telecasters, people from the advertising world, and generally the whole species belonging to the world of consumer culture. All this bonanza will now be the prerogative of Pakistan, the Indians can only suck their thumbs, disappointment writ large across their countenance.

Unfortunately, it is not just disappointment, but plain, old-fashioned envy as well, envy for the pots of money the Pakistanis will now gloatingly count, and of which we Indians will have no share. Our captain, the team manager and the commenting scribes have been all wrong in their assessment. The non-success of the Indian team had little to do with the inability of the players to strike a consistent form. That is only a superficial analysis; the real cause of their indifferent performance lies elsewhere. As honest-to-goodness Indians, our players were mercenary to the core. They knew that whether they played well or badly, a tidy sum was already coming their way by virtue of their inclusion in the team; their vision did not quite extend beyond their nose, the further gains that could come to them in future in case they did excellently in the World Cup did not impress them. Archetypal native sons, they had an extremely short time-preference. All play and no work makes jack a dull boy, so why not for a change concentrate on arranging business contracts, such as advertising, for cold cash, textiles or bathing soap or perfumery or some new version of automobile tyres? That leg-spinner from Madhya Pradesh, Hirwani or whatever his name, could not have not known the rule prohibiting display of advertisements on the apparel or on any part of the body in the Australia matches. He could not care less; he took the field with advertisements for three different consumer products emblazoned on his cap, on his shirt front, and the posterior of his pair of trousers. The umpires were stern; they ordered him to

take them off immediately. He felt no sense of shame or humiliation. But India, the land of Buddha and Gandhi, was humiliated beyond measure.

Why travel further, the Doordarshan, which, on selected days, arranged to telecast, via the satellites, the Channel Nine commentaries of the World Cup games, has convincingly demonstrated the basic element in India's guiding philosophy: greed is all, the lure of lucre must transcend all other considerations. Even as it beamed the borrowed telecasts, advertisements, which fetched lush, ready money, had absolute priority over cricket. Cricket was only the pretext, advertisements were all. The advertisements, once they commenced, went on interminably, the Pataudi couple flaunting their glamour in order to enhance the sale of perhaps a special brand of footwear or carpet, Sunil Gavaskar exhorting the viewers to go, go, go, exclusively for a particular textile, a bright young starlet waxing eloquent on the virtues of a hair lotion; meanwhile, a couple of wickets had fallen, a century was made or prevented to be made, or the crucial last five slog overs were over and the players had retreated to the far pavilion; India recognizes only other fineries.

MARCH, 1992

### THE VEIL OF CLASS, SORRY, CASTE

That Gramscian phenomenon, pessimism of the intelligence, emerges, with the passing of everyday, as the prime reality. One does not, alas, have to travel far for this revelation. A piece, picked at random from a recent issue of this journal, well illustrates what is happening. Iconoclasts were at work twenty years ago; they then made a point of slashing, with much flourish, statues of the likes of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. Iconoclasts continue to be at work today. A façade of ideology is retained, the intention, however, is quite clear. Radicalism is assumed to be coterminous with disbelief in established ideas on class formation and class struggle. The concept of class itself is suspect: caste, not class, according to such versions, represents the essence of Indian reality. Early pioneers who, taking into account the context of the times, tried to develop class consciousness amongst the peasantry and the working class are given short shrift, as, in the instance referred to, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati has been given. In contrast, individuals who were active collaborators of the British in their game of divide and rule are lionized. During most of his political career, B.R. Ambedkar was highly critical of the freedom movement, and tried to make life difficult for the Congress Party. Not that he was opposed to the Congress philosophy of class collaboration. Nor was he exercised over the phenomenon of class exploitation. His purpose in setting up a separate organization of the so-called depressed

classes was to have at his disposal a pressure group to be used as weaponry in his private political war fare; successive viceroys and governors-general egged him on; in their efforts to thwart the Indian National Congress, his intransigence proved to them about as valuable as Mohammad Ali Jinnah's. Ambedkar had scores to settle. He wanted to have his revenge against elements within the Congress leadership who had been personally nasty to him. The delighted British murmured serendipity, kissed him on both cheeks and provided him with every opportunity to play the role of avenger of the downtrodden castes. It is all of a piece that Jawaharlal Nehru too murmured serendipity, and installed Babasaheb Ambedkar as chairman of the Drafting Committee in the Constituent Assembly. Ambedkar obliged Nehru, as he had earlier obliged the British, and came up with a Constitution which is by large a replica of the Government of India Act 1935. It put out the dream of generations of patriots who had conceived independent India as an arcadia of a federation where the constituent states would come together, on the basis of democratic sanction, and decide to delegate, according to their own lights, certain minimal functions to the union government. Ambedkar, supposedly the great champion of all suppressed peoples, snuffed out that dream; the Constitution he drafted is authoritarian to the core. Much of the social oppression currently taking place in the country can be laid at the door of the over-centralized administrative and political structure Ambedkar took the lead in this set up. So what? We are now invited to shower him with retrospective accolade, for did not he try to establish the point that caste is superior to class? Priorities are priorities.

The first objective of radical pursuits is, it seems, to de-bunk Marxist notions of ideology and class consciousness, on the pretext of the need for their dialectical recreation. Ambedkar, the blue-eyed boy of Sir John Simon and Lord Willingdon, is accordingly rendered into a Messiah, while Swami Sahajanand

Saraswati, who tried to shape the All-India Kisan Sabha into a fighting organization of rural masses straddling the heterogeneity of classes, is run down in the higher terms. Underlying exercises of this nature is a not so inchoate stream of ideas: caste formations are the real thing, class formations are a sham; caste-based organizations are to be much written about, outfits which declare themselves as representing the interests exclusively of the working class and the peasantry are to have their warts revealed.

Is there much point in mincing words? The new historiography, so full of radical pretence, is in large measure externally inspired. Invectives will of course rain if mention is made of the heavy overlay of neocolonial influence on what passes for sociological research in the country. Facts are, however, facts. Consider the manner the case against Sahajanand Saraswati is built up. Scholars from North America are, either by training or by reason of class affiliation, leery of class analysis. They are head over heels in love with caste. One such itinerant political scientist has been pleased to write a biography of the Bihar Kisan Sabha leader. He has spared no efforts to paint Sahajanand Saraswati and his comrades along pre-conceived lines, as representatives of specific caste interests. Nothing suits our present radicals better. The following passage is therefore quoted most approvingly from the North American biography:

Socially the Kisan Sabha leadership was predominantly Bhumihar, and there were also Rajputs, Brahmins and Kayasthas, but in very small numbers: variation in the social composition of leadership appeared at the district level where locally prominent castes were found, with occasional Kurmis and Keoris. The Bhumihar dominance simply reflected the strength of that group as the major element among the 'landed gentry' and 'adventurers' in the period. In terms of class background, the Kisan leaders were primarily from landholding families, in some areas of

considerable means, more generally of moderate holdings, and in a few cases from small-holding families.

This genre of analysis, which assumes an identity between hypothesis and proof, has infinite possibilities, and might be applied even to clinch the point that since Karl Marx was an absentee landlord from Rhineland and Fredreich Engels was a rich textile manufacturer from Manchester, their writings were surreptitious propaganda on behalf of feudalism and capitalism; isolated passages could be lifted from the works of both to prove their lurking sympathy for these outmoded social systems.

The same North American author could be profitably commissioned to write a book on the Naxalite upsurge in West Bengal in the late sixties and the early seventies. He might then proceed along predictable lines. Was not Charu Mazumdar a Brahmin, and had he not a considerable bequest of landed property, augmented through what he further received as dowry at the time of his marriage? Did not the rest of the Naxalite leadership mostly consist of the Chatterjis, the Sens, the Roy Chowdhurys, et al? The movement as a whole, there is therefore little doubt, was dominated by upper caste Bengali Hindus. Of course were you to travel to Midnapore, you could come across a Rana, but, as his name betrays, he was a Rajput settled in Bengal. In Darjeeling, you might come across an occasional Santal and an occasional Murmu; their presence *at the district level*, like the presence of Kurmis and Keoris in Bihar, could not, however, be allowed to spoil the charm of the basic thesis; Indians, wherever they are live caste, breathe caste, think caste; only caste matters, nothing else does. The Naxalite upsurge in West Bengal was actually a rear-guard action on behalf of the upper castes for delaying the induction of the lower peasantry into such impeccable radical fighting revolutionary organizations as the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes federation.

The hypothesis is never proved, it need only be asserted, and repeated a number of times. That is supposed to give it the status

of an axiom, and honourable names are besmirched beyond measure. The hatchet job is pursued with a single-minded zeal. Thus a passage is quoted from the manifesto of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, the organization Sahajanand Saraswati had succeeded in setting up, building block by building block, through long years of travail: 'A peasant is known as a *grihastha*, a person who earns his livelihood by cultivation and agriculture, be he a petty landlord, *rajyat* or labour working on wages for ploughing fields.' One would have thought that this was a pretty comprehensive, all embracing definition, excluding none, and suggesting that whoever toils in the field, whatever his or her caste alignment, belongs to the peasantry. But no, our radicals know better. The Swami's Kisan Sabha specifically excluded the peasantry belonging to the lower castes, the majority of whom were presumably landless. On what basis is this conclusion arrived at? Why, everybody knows *grihastha* has an exclusive connotation, it covers only those belonging to the upper castes and therefore peasants of lower echelons are left out. ('...*grihastha* has a definite caste connotation and only those from the upper castes are *grihasthas*.'

Once more, the hypothesis is the evidence. There is just one additional piece of information offered: the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha had supposedly expressed itself against granting land rights to traditional agricultural labourers belonging to the inferior castes. No document is cited where this important policy principle was adumbrated by the Kisan Sabha. For all one knows, this too could be a presumption on the part of those who swear by the radicalism of castes.

True, in the immediate pre-Independence phase, particularly during the war years, while the Kisan Sabha did adopt the slogan of 'land to the tiller', the greater emphasis in its programme was on the reform of tenancy laws in both raiyatvay and zamindari areas, and no sharp differentiation was drawn between the interests of the small landholder and the small

tenant on the one hand, and the landless agricultural worker on the other. The Kisan Sabha was a broad front; the prime objective was to unite the peasantry against the imperialist rulers, the big landlords and the greedy grain merchants and hoarders. But that hardly made it either anti-agricultural worker or pro-upper caste. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati presided over the Bhakra session of the All-India Kisan Sabha in 1943. The resolution passed at that session contained the following couple of sentences: The Kisan does not profit by the speculative rise prices. He parts with the most part of his grains at the harvest time at low prices and buys it back at high prices from the hoarders. He has to pay fantastic prices for essential commodities like kerosene, cloth and sugar.

The hoarders and merchants were invariably upper caste, but the AIKS, with Sahajanand as president, decried their role in the most unambiguous terms. The kind of statements the Kisan Sabha could then make against inordinate increase in farm prices, which help only the upper peasantry and their class allies, will no longer pass muster these days; even the far-out revolutionaries are now discovering virtues in Sharad Joshi's slogans.

The radical scholars remain unfazed. They offer what they consider to be the clincher of an argument. In a certain district of Bihar in 1943, 90 per cent of the landless peasants had organized themselves under the banner of the Triveni Sangh, an avowedly casteist organization, instead of joining Sahajanand Saraswati's Kisan Sabha the case is therefore proved that the dispossessed mistrusted the Swami. Does this piece of empiricism, however, establish what the radicals want to establish? Even as of now, there are perhaps districts in Bihar where as much as 90 per cent of the peasantry are illiterate, and only 10 per cent know how to sign their names. Does that establish the point that the peasantry prefer illiteracy to literacy, or that illiteracy belongs to a superior ethical plane? That the majority

of the peasantry continue to be under the sway of a casteist organization does not necessarily prove the moral or the programmatic superiority of that organization. Nor is the fact that in many districts, peasants belonging to the lower caste had not joined Sahajanand's Kisan Sabha indicative of his failure to espouse their cause. Since social awareness is likely to be the least among the most oppressed sections of the peasantry, it should not surprise if their mobilization within the fold of a fighting organization lags behind. That does no discredit to the organization, nor to its founder.

True, Sahajanand Saraswati's career as a political activist was beset by contradictions. He flip-flopped on a number of occasions, and could not quite make up his mind on the degree of closeness to establish with the communists. There were imperfections in the organization he had set up and inconsistencies in its programmes. Towards the end of his life, he suffered from fits of depression; that certainly affected his judgement. Even when each of these points is conceded, a case would still exist to appraise Sahajanand Saraswati's role with reference to the context of his times. Merely because he sprang from a superior caste, his Kisan Sabha should not be cast out as casteist. Foreigners, at least some of them, have their own reason to run down mainstream leftist formations. Must others too join the pastime? It is of course their decision, for it is still a reasonably free country. But once they do, they must not expect diplomatic immunity on the ground that they are 'left radical'. The demolition job they engage themselves in suggest that other appellations might suit them better.

MAY, 1989

## DAY OF THE OBSCURANTS

There is a hint of panic in the air: the polity is under siege by the fundamentalists, it is as if almost all is over except the shouting. Cries of anguish are mixed with accusatory statements: the nation was given the choice, between the dynasty and religious obscurantism; it opted, most unwisely, for the latter last November, because the Left had egged it on; friends of the fundamentalists thereby attained respectability. With their latest triumph in the state assembly elections, they are now entrenched at the base of the power structure. Since the central administration is under commitment to enlarge devolutions, their entry into state administrations over large parts of Aryavarta will enable them to travel from strength to strength. The fundamentalists can afford to wait; they will wait for the right opportunity before striking the final blow. They will pile increasingly unreasonable demands upon the centre, endless charades of near-ultimatums will alternate with pretences of reasonable-ness, until the moment arrives when they feel confident that the phoney war need not continue any more. They need to be secure that their infiltration of the army and administration is complete, they are in a position from where they can immobilize town and country, and they can therefore move to seize power. This seizure could come through a coup within the superstructure, such as a drastic cabinet reshuffle, through a series of street battles and communal killings, through

even conventional democratic elections. Whichever way it happens, the country would be dragged back a thousand or so years, as Iran, in the near neighbourhood, has been. There is going to be a major difference in the quality of the tragedy enacted in the two countries though. In the case of Iran, the fundamentalists have put to shackles at most forty to fifty million people; in India, it could be bondage for more than eight hundred million, that is, as much as one-sixth of the human race. The blame for this immense calamity would have to be squarely attributed to those pseudo-ideologues who, in their patience with the dynasty, decided to give the head to obscurantism recent electoral arrangements: as you sow, so you reap.

If the search is to establish a nexus between historical events, it is not the more modern annals, but relatively ancient data which bear being given greater attention. The moment the 'national leadership' went along with Mountbatten and agreed to partition the country, did they not enter through the trap-door of an irreversible logic? The fundamentalists were gifted their point: having come to a polity which is the outcome of a non-secular manoeuvre, the candidates have now no business to flaunt secular credentials. And is it not possible to go a bit even further back? While Mahatma Gandhi did record his protest at the decision to divide the country, was he not the one who committed the original sin? It was he who chose the curious visage of *Ram Rajya* so as to win over innocent god-fearing countrymen to the cause of the Indian National Congress. The Mahatma was single-minded in his objective; he obliterated the distinction between political practice and religious perambulation. He went about much in the manner of the Hindu *sadhus*, only minus the saffron robes. Ritualistic readings from the Quran and the Bible in evening congregations hardly fooled anyone. Once the Congress accepted his moral chaperoning, history was already set on a particular course. *Ram Rajya* by itself, the politician in the Mahatma occasionally

realized, was too unabashedly a Hindu concept; the Muslims needed to be offered a complementary attraction; once more, Gandhiji's obscurantism was at work, he went across to pick the cause of the rabidly reactionary Turkish caliphate. By that single act, he told the nation which direction in time he wanted it to move. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, given his weakness for European clothes, ham sandwiches and whisky and soda, was a secularist by instinct. The cynic in him, however, decided to hoist the Hindu hypocrites by their own petard. He turned nasty with a purpose. The nastiness bore fruit: It was a matter of minor detail whether the Mahatma did or did not formally bless the Congress decision to accept the Mountbatten proposals. Having pushed the nation's freedom movement along sectarian rails, he had to acquiesce in the deal.

That peculiar expression which gained circulation in the inter-war period—the 'nationalist Muslim' – had its own story to tell. It was, by all assumptions, a Hindu nation which the Indian National Congress was presiding over. A muslim who joined the Congress was by implication an outsider; he was a freak, a contradiction in terms, an obverse of the Sam Goldwyn paradigm; the Congress simply chose to exclude him in the course of those twenty-odd years between the Non-cooperation and the Quit India movements. The icons and totems of Congress politics became interchangeable with Hindu icons and totems. The Mahatma failed, and the Congress therefore failed, to perceive the absurdity of this arrangement in a country where at least a quarter of the population belonged to other denominations.

The die was thus already caste. Jawaharlal Nehru's perorations, inside the Constituent Assembly and outside, were exercises in the expiation of sin. Or perhaps he was only exhibiting the dichotomy of the Hindu mind, which is simultaneously for eating the cake and having it too. Nehru, his family and friends came to their inheritance because they opted

for the sectarian choice. They nonetheless wanted to keep up pretences. The Constitution, they insisted, must mention India as a secular republic. It was so mentioned; none bothered. The charade has been kept on. Some thirty years later, Nehru's daughter was adamant that, in addition to its being secular, India should also be described as a socialist republic in the Constitution. Her will was done. Words do not break bones; words do not change the face of reality either. Communal killings continued in the country, and the planned mulcting of the poor; some secularism, some socialism.

Starry-eyed admirers of Jawaharlal Nehru speak of the ambivalence of his mind; those who are less charitable call it by its commoner description, hypocrisy. He took his duty to be complete once the Constitution said what it said; it was apparently not his responsibility to ensure the advent of the secular dawn. Bhumi poojas were organized at government construction sites, for years on end, in Nehru's physical presence. The Indian Navy would set afloat a destroyer or an aircraft carrier; even that would call for the Hindu ritual of breaking a coconut; such occasions were again graced by the august presence of the nation's first prime minister. Nehru had this egotistic theory that he, as the nation's number one citizen, must be where the people were. Since the people congregated at the Kumbh mela which the naked *sadhus* also thronged, of course he had to be there. With Nehru blessing the event, the crowds at the holy congregations were even thicker in the subsequent years. The state thereby identified itself with outrageously sectarian celebrations. Trust Jawaharlal Nehru to have his own explanation; India, he thundered, was a great, ancient civilization guided by spirituality and religious thoughts. He left nobody in doubt he was referring to Hindu religiosity.

It has been a Hindu state all along. Strewn across in this or that government office are the ubiquitous statuettes of Hindu gods and goddesses. Some official minion or other garlands them

every morning and performs other religious rituals. A chief minister is in session in his official chamber, a *sadhu*, with his paraphernalia enters untrammelled and offers the chief minister blessings and prasad, affairs of the state come to a total halt. There are a billion Hindu gods and goddesses; you cannot escape being accosted by portraits of at least one amongst them, wherever you are whether it is a late-running government train, a government inspection-bungalow, a government-sponsored film festival, or an elevator in a government-owned building carrying you up to the fourteen or fifteenth floor.

Nehru, the founder-prime minister, supposedly the greatest of secularists, presided over the polity while these non-secular totems were being unhurriedly set up. He did not bat an eyelid. All he did was to innovate special 'secular' occasions. The methodology was an adaptation from Mahatma Gandhi's all-faith evening congregations. Once there was an excess of official exuberance over the performance of a particular Hindu charade, attempts were made to balance it by organizing, on a modest scale, a Muslim or a Parsi or a Christian or a Sikh ritual too. Secularism was thereby given a new twist: a state which compromises with all strands of sectarianism is the truest bearer of the secular cause.

No, the dynasty did not lift even a finger to stop the rise of obscurantism; it actually built the infrastructure from where fundamentalism now draws its strength. Indira Gandhi, with her predilection for holy Hindu godmen, was a public relations exponent par excellence for the shadiest voodoo causes. Given the compulsions of vote-gathering, she had to combine her temple-hopping with periodical excursions to mosques and churches, but her Hindu credentials could not be more overt. The son tried hard in his own manner, to save the dynasty. He styled himself after the mother. He even dragged his Catholic-born foreign wife to obscure temples to be blessed by topless pot-bellied priests; he too combined such forays with dutiful

periodic visits to dargahs and synagogues, gestures like to Muslim Women Divorce Bill and banning Salman Rushdie. All these were, however, followed by even a greater tilt towards the direction of Hindu sectarianism. The state was soon rendered into the happiest hunting ground for bigots of all descriptions, including those whose Hindutva permits them to claim Kashmir as their fief, and shoot down the infidels.

In due course, instant telecommunications via the satellites, which belonged to the public domain, were placed at the disposal of the fundamentalist cause. Day after predictable day, week after interminable week, pseudo-religious television serials have gone on extolling the awesome magical virtues of Rama or Bhishma or Vishwamitra. The Hindu masses, carefully kept away from both literacy and enlightenment, were not now officially informed of the greatness of Rama. Once that happened, the sequence was unstoppable. How dare you say that the great Rama will be without a birthplace of his own? Just suggest that the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* serials be taken off Doordarshan; they might take away your Indian passport.

Now that the radical cause is on the decline all over the world, with Mother Russia herself returning to the womb of Christianity and Polish women dutifully re-obeying the papal interdict on abortions, here too it is going to be waiting time. The circumstances have to grow worse before they get better. But either you have faith in science and the rationality of the historical process, or you give up, in the manner of frustrated Japanese novelists. The choice while difficult is nonetheless clear-cut.

MARCH, 1990

## IT HAS CEASED TO MATTER

The international fraternity of socialism has ceased to be, no communist party is any longer its brothers' keeper. So the Left in our land need hardly feel apologetic over either the convulsions in east Europe or the tragedy in China. If they nonetheless have to be shame-faced in the current scenario, it should be on account of other reasons, touching on developments nearer home. A socialist or a communist is a fake if he is not, in the first place, against imperialism. How many within the ranks of the Left in the country have taken the trouble to go on record against the manner the national government has gone about, and continues to go about establishing its hegemonic status against the regimes of Sri Lanka and Nepal? To argue that none others have protested will also be false. A communist or a socialist is not supposed to hang with the conformist crowd; he or she is expected to have his or her moorings in ideology. He or she, in other words, must not be afraid of being marked out as non-jingoist. Instead, there are torrents of convoluted sentences which place ambivalence on the pedestal, heap after heap of ifs and buts, absurd syllogisms in justification of equally absurd official standpoints. It could be the unquiet memories of 1962, and the fear of being charged, once more, of treacherous conduct. Or it could be a more straightforward sojourn towards the direction of Calvary: socialist convictions are all right, but look here. Left ideology

must not interfere with our pan-Asian aspirations; since our system is more progressive than either Nepal's or Sri Lanka's, our troops and our intransigence will be good for the people in these minor countries, it is our socialist task to teach them how to courtesy and obey.

It is assumed that protests emanating from these countries have no objective basis. Since Nepal is an absolute monarchy, its government has no business to demur even if we insist on foisting unequal treaties on it. Given its class alignments, our government in New Delhi cannot be faulted for the kind of argument it has mounted; to it, the existence of one category of exploitation provides the rationale for the introduction of a second category. In any case, unscrupulous Indian traders and businessmen who, for decades on end, have squeezed the Nepalese countryside dry can legitimately look for protection and support to the Congress(I) leadership; there is a filial link. This convenience is not available for the parties on the Left; between the hucksters operating along the border and them, it would be awesomely difficult to establish any ideological or class links. It is, rather, classical 'tailism' at work: our government rails against Nepal, it is our patriotic duty to forsake both thinking and ideology and follow, blindly, the government's line.

With regard to Sri Lanka, the ideological betrayal is of a much graver nature. In tired-sounding resolutions that faithfully follow one another, the point continues to be made that the IPKF presence in the island is a blow to the United States navy's malevolent intentions apropos of Trincomalee. This is poppycock. The IPKF went into Sri Lanka with the full blessings of the American administration, which, for its own reasons, will not for the present mind India's playing the role of regional constabulary. It is unsporting on the part of the Americans but, as of now, they are not particularly interested in bailing out the purveyors of hackneyed phrases along Indian shores. What gets

written or, rather, re-written is yesterday's resolutions by persons who are reluctant to face today's truth.

Is there any means of walking away from the basic truth? In Sri Lanka, the Indian troops are an army of occupation. The established government there wants it to go. The official opposition wants it to go. The insurgency opposition wants it to go. The insurgency opposition wants its departure. The Sinhalese-speaking never liked it; the overwhelming majority of the Tamils now abhor it; the Muslim community, otherwise known as moors, have declared that the country's problems cannot be resolved till as long as foreign troops interfere with the country's administrative processes. Just ask the Left in Sri Lanka, ask the Communist Party, ask the Sama Samaja Party, or ask Vijaya Kumaratunge's widow: they all agree that no grounds exists justifying the continued presence of the IPKF on Sri Lankan soil.

The Left, if they cannot afford to be honest with the world, must at least be honest with themselves. They have to admit, at least to themselves, that the people of Sri Lanka have the absolute right to abrogate the terms of an agreement initialled by their past president. This is the core of national sovereignty. It is here irrelevant whether Ranasinghe Premadasa is a skunk or a scoundrel, whether his government is tottering, whether he has pitched his demand in the manner he has because the Janata Vimukthi Paramuna has caught him by the throat. It is equally irrelevant whether, following the departure of Indian troops, a dark night of anarchy descends on Sri Lanka. It is a free people's inalienable right to choose anarchy if they so decide. One who believes in exporting order, and enforcing such order through the intermediation of foreign troops, is no socialist. The resolutions he composes cannot cloak the nakedness of the fact that his or her claim to belong to the Left is sheer flippancy, or worse.

Hypocrisy of course does not believe in conforming to the

bounds of consistent behaviour. Thus, at one end, the government in New Delhi will insist that the IPKF is for ever, because Jayewardene's commitment cannot be brushed aside by his successor, and Indian troops will see to it that it is not brushed aside. At the other end the same government has not the least doubt in its mind that, as far as Nepal is concerned, continuity in policy is an invalid concept: way back in 1978, Morarji Desai might have agreed to sign with the northern neighbour a transit treaty which was separate from a trade treaty, but indulgences of this nature are not to be permitted *circa* 1989.

Must the Left go along with such chicanery? Should these great issues which involve relationship and behaviour with foreign nations be left to the care of a handful of professional drafters of resolutions who, perhaps for their private reasons, seek the easiest way out and tow the government's line? The government consists of class enemies whose external policy through some sleight of hand, gains acceptance as the right and proper policy for the Left to follow, even if it in effect means support to imperialist – and sometimes even fascist – causes, lock stock and barrel.

On their way to the aspired popular democratic revolution, the Left must have stumbled, and stumbled badly. Otherwise how does one explain such extraordinary developments as that while furious debates are pursued over the merits and demerits of perestroika and glasnost, and a central committee can meet over and over to decide whether the students at Tiananmen Square were misled by alien ideology entirely on their own, or whether their deviation is attributable to some confusion over ideology and praxis right at the level of the China party's leadership. No notice is taken of the fact that we, one of the poorest nations on earth, have been the world's largest importer of armament – amounting to, on the average, Rs 7,000 to Rs 8,000 crore annually – for the past three years. The prime minister, in his altogether freewheeling manner, brands as anti-

national whoever criticizes the launching of the intermediate range ballistic missile, *Agni*; there is not one statement from the Left condemning the prime minister's wild charge. To oppose *Agni* and similar other resource-wasting defence projects and to deploy the funds thus saved for expanding programmes for primary education, irrigation, health and nutrition could, in certain circumstances, be manifestation of the highest forms of patriotism. But, sorry, to utter this basic home truth is no longer considered to be a compulsory obligation of a Left ideologue.

The Left is learning and learning fast. Once upon a time, it was a simple world, the Left consisted of star-struck idealists, they had their undeviable morality, they could distinguish good from evil and vice versa. The Left have left behind, or so it seems, those innocent days. They can now discover streaks of good in evil. And they compose their spidery resolutions accordingly.

Is there a wrench in the heart? Well, don't you know that the heart has ceased to matter?

JULY, 1989

### WHAT IS GOOD FOR THE BULLS ...

Karl Emil Maximilian Weber is a nearly forgotten name, and *Die protestantische Ethik und der 'Geist' des kapitalismus* is a forgotten tract, its faded message meeting a fate worse than that of a sheaf of barren leaves. Without that produced means of production, capital, there can be no growth. Capital, however, is not a free gift of nature. Its accumulation cannot be taken for granted. It stipulates the sacrifice of current consumption in exchange for consumption in the future. Man's instinctive time-preference tends to impede this accumulatory process. It is a crisis of sorts, involving almost a species of dialectics, which was easy for Marx to handle. The opportunity for exploitation and larger profits accumulation ensures the dialectics. The solution was, however, to be avoided like the plague by devout anti-socialists. Weber's tract rescued them. Capitalism was supplied with a moral foundation. The *leitmotif* of the system switched from profit-seeking to frugality and hard work. Weber had little difficulty to provide dozens of examples, from the early phase of capitalist development in Britain and the rest of Europe, of how rigid Protestant ethics paved the way for runaway accumulation.

Great copiers, the Japanese sucked in the lesion. They stole systematically from western technology, but the application of that technology hinged on maximizing savings. Which they did, under the aegis of the state, via high land taxes, throughout the

earlier period of growth. The country's resurrection after the Second World War, its transition from rack and ruin to being the world's strongest economy, was rooted in the refusal to allow real wages and real managerial remunerations to rise by even a single percentage point in the two decades following Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This was feasible because of a kind of religious frenzy which seized the nation. Western Europe, equally devastated, but non-nuked, encountered a much more tractable problem; Marshal Aid was instrumental for hefty transfers of capital from the United States, the need for domestic accumulation was to that extent reduced. Even so, the rate of savings in what was then the German Federal Republic, and in some of the smaller countries like the Netherlands as well, hovered around 25 to 30 per cent of gross domestic product in the stretch of twenty years from 1945 to 1965. Konrad Adenauer was a Catholic, the ethics he opted for to bolster his statecraft had nonetheless the stamp of Max Weber all over.

That quaint notion of capitalism is altogether outlandish in the view of those currently overseeing the processes of the India economy. If some savings need to be done, that obligation belongs to rich foreigners, we will simply cajole them into giving us a part of what they save. Borrowing has been elevated to a moral right. Are we not one of the poorest countries on earth, have we not received, in per capita terms, very little aid till now? Besides, have not the imperialist west exploited us mercilessly over the past few centuries, what is then wrong if we ask them to foot henceforth the bill for our economic development?

Such an ethical formulation gives short shrift to Max Weber. It is an updated version of capitalism, frugality can go to the blazes, profit-ranking is everything. A social halo attaches to the person who makes the most money in the shortest possible time. If he cuts a few corners, and bends a few rules, so what, does he not, every time, come up trumps? Individuals like him

make capitalism click. Liberalization, after all is primarily intended to allow such heroes all the elbow room they need. If they prosper, the nation prospers. Remember the famous aphorism from the gentleman who headed the automobile company, General Motors, and whom Dwight Eisenhower picked as his defence secretary: what was good for General Motors was good for the United States of America.

What is good for the great bulls operating in the country's still constricted stock exchanges, the government must have felt all along, is good for the Indian Republic. The message was driven home to the top brass of the 'nationalized' banks and public financial institutions. Was it not simply unbelievable, the shares of even industrial units that have been sick and closed for the past several years were rising. Those who could perform such magic are the nation's most precious assets. The economy might be doing badly in the formal sense, the rate of industrial growth might actually be negative, but no matter, the miracle-makers were at work, they were creating wealth out of nothing, and therefore deserved the solidest support from the state. The banks and the other financial institutions instinctively knew whose requirements they were supposed to cater for. The market signals, have not the great gurus from Washington DC, taught, could never go wrong. The market signals were putty clay in the hands of the miracle-workers, who willed the stock prices to soar to the dizziest heights. They were no ordinary bulls, they were great bulls. If accommodation was what these bulls demanded, no questions asked, accommodation was what was to be granted to them.

One must not ask whether the liquid funds, with the help of which they played their tricks in the market, were being provided against certain junk papers. Even if one knew that the papers were fake, one must keep mum. Even if standing instructions had to be flouted in order to accommodate the bulls, one must not make an issue of it. To inconvenience the

bulls was akin to inconveniencing the nation, a lack of patriotism did not behove a top-notch banker.

It was the South Sea Bubble story all over. Sooner or later, the bubble had to burst, the stock exchanges could not indefinitely continue along a course which bore no relationship with the realities of the economy. An entire range of smalltime god-fearing investors thought that the bulls were for ever; they could hardly be blamed, they only followed the lead of the government-owned financial institutions. Now they have come to total grief. A cynical government will not be distraught by the magnitude of the disaster that has overtaken these trusting citizens. It has other immediate worries. It would be embarrassing if a nexus were somehow proved to have been there between the great bulls on the one side and establishment animals, political animals not excluding, on the other. The skeletons in the cupboard must stay safely boarded up.

In such circumstances, much energy and resources will inevitably be spent to identify a few scapegoats. There will be from the most diverse and shadiest quarters, a synchronization of the raucous chant of non *mea culpas*. The government was well meaning, but it was misled. The bank chairmen were equally well meaning, they too were misled. So was the case with the office-holders of the nation's central bank and of the other financial institutions such as the National Housing Board. It is going to be, rest assured, a breathtakingly impressive cover-up. One or two miserable creatures will be caught by their foot and charged with the responsibility of having led astray the entire lot of financial functionaries, including the finance minister. The government functionaries, it will be said with profundity, did not sin, they were sinned against. It was an unfortunate episode; appropriate lessons are to be drawn from it. Meanwhile, if a few thousands of small invertors have been pauperized, ah, well, in life the rough has to be taken along with the smooth.

The fault, dear Cassius, does lie in the government's

theology. Free market principles have their time and place. Were the structural adjustment programme the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund wax eloquent over allowed a completely free rein, strictly on the academic plan, the economy might, in a dozen or two dozen years, have found itself launched into a satisfying growth path, and the satisfying rate of growth also accompanied by responsible price stability. But for that to happen, it would be currently essential to cut out all subsidies and social welfare programmes from the government's budget, to slash drastically the defence outlay, and to abandon the atomic energy and space research programmes, no more implosions and no more playing around with rocket technology. It would also call for the total abolition of the regime of administrative price controls, and according of absolute freedom to industry and trade, including to the transnational corporations, so that they could mulct the buyers and consumers to the maximum possible extent. It would also be imperative that thousands of so-called inefficient industrial units be closed and hundreds of thousands of employees retrenched. It would additionally hinge upon the concept of an open economy being stretched further, with permission for untrammeled entry granted to foreign banks, insurance companies and other similar agencies. It would call for recognition of the harsh possibility of a good part of the country's domestic product as well as of real estate slipping under the ownership of foreigners.

The Bank and the Fund might raise Cain, but that variant of *laissez-faire* in hundred million people is already showing the strains. The complexities of managing this unwieldy frame are increasing every day. It is an unstable equilibrium. The mail order prescriptions doled out from a distance of eleven thousand miles are extraordinarily difficult to fill. If excessive zeal is shown in one or two directions, there could be civil turmoil of the worst kind, the administration might collapse, the government might fall. Politicians have an uncanny sensitivity enabling them to sort

out risk worthy adventures from outright follies. However hard they might be pushed from behind, the politicians, succeed, at the seemingly very last moment, in avoiding the precipice. In areas that matter crucially, liberalization and love of the free market will therefore be subject to a set of boundary conditions.

Major risk-bearing is out, minor pastimes will come to occupy the space. Playing footsie with the share market will be considered permissible behaviour. What is the point of inducting a liberal ambience if even honest crooks are not allowed the latitude of indulging in some crookedness? The stock exchange scam unfortunately got somewhat out of hand, there is, however, no occasion for any undue panic. The market-loving buccaneers will be simply told to move to a different, perhaps even greener, pasture. Liberalization is worth nothing if it does not permit unbridled free competition in at least some activities. Such competition will hurt some citizens. But if they cannot stand the heat, the remedy is obvious, they must quit the kitchen. Their discomfiture is not ground to stifle the in-house geniuses from honing their skills in skullduggery. Besides, those who want to play the game of stocks and shares are assumed to have some rudimentary knowledge about expectations and all that. If Frank Knight's *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* is too esoteric or too dated, they are welcome to read up Robert K. Merton: if a crowd of people simultaneously want the market to turn bullish, it will turn bullish; if they want it to be bearish, it will be bearish. The authorities will be fool-hardy to try to tamper with this natural law; that will be anti-market, and the government will be reported against at the appropriate addresses in Washington DC. This government is already making a hash of SAP. If, on top of that, out of fear of public opinion, it wants to hinder the roaming of the free market bulls, rap it hard over the knuckles or just hold out the threat to rap it over the knuckles. It will scamper back to good conduct. The crooks can then safely resume their crooked ways.

June, 1992

### THEATRE OF THE VULGAR

Does not all this seem allegorical, the goings-on in that supposedly maximum security prison on the outskirts of the nation's capital? It is open city for killers, smugglers, crooks, hashish-runners; they rule the roost; they bribe their way in, bribe their way out; they have proved the point, everybody and everything has a price, and everybody and everything is purchasable, no man or institution remains beyond the pale; let your ego mock at you, truth shall prevail, of course, it shall; truth, which is a compendium of facts, truth, which transcends facts, truth that this is a nation of crooks and sneaks, not excluding chief ministers, not excluding university chancellors and vice-chancellors, not excluding the officer who presides over your neighbourhood police station or marriage registration bureau.

Consider that Mint Road institution, the nation's central bank, custodian of its monetary conscience, the Reserve Bank of India. How many would now bother to remember the occasion way back in 1973, when the Reserve Bank passed – or it could be, marrow less non-wonder that it had already become, was instructed to pass – a most curious order? One nondescript non-banking financial company was marking time. It had the appearance of a small-time, small-town agency; no hiatus existed between appearance and reality. Suddenly, it struck, as the Americans say, pay dirt; it succeeded in making the right political connections, and things began to happen. The Reserve Bank, the

nation's monetary conscience, had standard rules prescribed for governing non-banking financial companies. One major rule stipulated that such a company would not be allowed to accept public deposits exceeding 25 per cent of the total of its paid-up capital and reserves. The company we have in mind used to issue, against commitment to pay premium, welfare endowment certificates; that was its modality for accepting public deposits. In 1973, the Reserve Bank chose to make an exception, and only in the case of this particular company, with respect to the rule regulating acceptance of public deposits. This company, and only this company, was exempted from the rule; it was given unfettered freedom to accept public deposits, never mind the size of its capital base. Certain conditions were set, which were an eyewash.

It was an extraordinary decision, but it was not challenged, no one cared to test its validity, in terms of Article 14 of the Constitution, in a court of law, despite the invidious preference shown to a particular company. The company took wings. It appointed an army of agents and sub-agents. These agents and sub-agents were chosen with care; agents in particular were, more often than not, close relatives of those who are known as 'influential people'. The category of 'influential people' of course included ministers, other politicians, civil servants, members of the judiciary, police officials, bank managers, income tax officers, mining contractors, mining contractors doubling up as trade union bosses. The modus operandi was carefully worked out. The entire premia collected against new endowment policies in any year were considered as the company's income; 70 per cent of the amount thus collected from new policies was straightaway distributed as commission to the agents and sub-agents. This, after all, was what capitalism was about; the enthusiasm of the agents and sub-agents knew no bounds. They imbibed the zeal of Seventh Day Adventists, and spread themselves far and wide, in state after state, in town and country, in fields and factories and

mines. Capture new policies and fatten your commission. Invade government and mercantile offices, invade the mining area, lie in wait at the factory gates on pay day. Catch hold of an illiterate share-cropper or an innocent mine-worker or a lower middle class housewife or a *badli* factory hand, and shove an endowment policy in his or her hand. Bamboozle him or her, he or she must ensure his or her future, he or she will only have to pay a premium of only five or ten rupees every month, but, at the end of fifteen or twenty years, he or she will receive a package of so many thousand rupees. The agent or sub-agent had to be glib, glib, glib, and the lure of the fat commission was a great stirrer of glibness. He or she had to be both glib and quick, for he or she could not afford to give the prospective victim time to think; the effective rate of interest which the endowment policy implied would usually fall short of the rate of interest currently being offered by the banks; however, the victim must not be allowed the time to grasp that simple fact.

The agents in particular, more often than not, were related to 'influential people'; and were more often than not, benamards of influential people. You take care of influential people, and influential people would take care of you. So, given the non-pareil benediction of the Reserve Bank of India, the company prospered and prospered. An additional factor contributed to its burgeoning prosperity. Sixty to seventy per cent of the policies got lapsed in the very first year of enrolment and the premia collected on their account were promptly forfeited. Your policy-holder is an illiterate peasant or an innocent *adivasi* or a *badli* factory worker freshly arrived from a Bihar or Uttar Pradesh village; insert in small print a set of conditions to be fulfilled within three or six months if the policy is to stay alive, and do not tell your victim about these conditions; hey presto, your efforts to get the policy lapsed would be crowned with success. Moreover, you had built in a special disincentive for your agents and sub-agents so that they really saw to it that policies did lapse

at the end of the first year of enrolment; while commission on premium collected from a new policy was 70 per cent in the year of enrolment, that for collection of premia for subsequent years for the same policy was only 10 per cent. Why bother to collect the premium when the commission was a measly 10 per cent? Lapses would thus soar, forfeitures would mount, there would be no dearth of funds to offer fat commissions to agents and sub-agents who more often than not, were related to 'influential people'. The managing director of the company would emerge as a financial wizard, he would strut about in the manner of the elder, statesman, he would fete and be feted by ministers, members of parliament, civil servants, judges, directors-general of police, income tax commissioners, bank chairmen, newspaper editors, etc. etc. One paltry condition set by the Reserve Bank of India was that the company would maintain at all times not less than 75 per cent of its total assets in the form of investment in government and other trust securities and fixed deposits of scheduled commercial banks. This was no strain at all, for the hundreds of crores of rupees forfeited through lapses were not part of the assets; forfeitures and the fabulous commissions were all, the gravy law where it lay.

Only once a small patch of cloud threatened to invade an innocuous corner of the sky. During the Janata Party interregnum, in 1978, the Union government passed a legislation entitled the Prize Chits and Money Circulation (Banning) Act; the enforcement of the Act was left to the discretion of the state governments who could not do a thing to regulate the affairs of such companies. Now the new legislation provided them with an opportunity. Availing of it, one State government served notice on the company in August 1979; the new Act, it was told, applied to it must submit plans for winding up its business as per provisions of the legislation. The state government concerned was emboldened to take the step it took, for it had chanced to see a confidential report of an internal team of inspection of the

Reserve Bank of India, confirming the state government's own findings concerning the shady nature of the company's operations.

The company straightaway went to the neighbourly High Court and sought an injunction against the state government's order. The honourable High Court readily granted the injunction on a muggy day in September 1979. Everything had since then proceeded along a leisurely fashion. Along with the state government, the Government of India and the Reserve Bank of India were impugned as interested parties; neither of them appeared to be particularly interested; affidavits and counter-affidavits were called for; but who does not know that the judiciary in our country is terribly overworked, the injunction thus continued for six and a half long years. The Janata Party interregnum too was in the meantime over at the Centre. Perhaps the company's political connections were revived, perhaps its patrons sealed even higher pinnacles of power and glory in New Delhi. Irrespective of whether the injunction was vacated or not, the Government of India could have so amended the laws of the land as to put a restraint on the company's operations; the Board of Directors of the Reserve Bank of India too could have, if they had only so chosen, read the inspection report submitted to the Bank's Department of Non-Banking Operations and acted thereon. This is, however, the land of Buddha the Enlightened; the Government of India and the Reserve Bank decided not to see any evil, not to hear any evil, not to speak any evil. The company's business has expanded twelve to thirteen times since September 1979, lapses of policies and forfeitures of premia must have also increased according to scale. How does it matter, it is only illiterate adivasis, peasants, factory workers and members of the lower middle class who got jilted; true, they must have lost hundreds and hundreds of crores of rupees thanks to the majesty of the High Court's stay order; so what, look at the brighter side of things, the agents and

sub-agents, and the influential people to whom they are related, never had it so good; you cannot dispute that this too is redistribution of income, of a sort. From time to time, the state government which had originally served the order on the company, pleaded with the Union government to nationalize the company and make it a unit of the Life Insurance Corporation of India; New Delhi did not deign to respond.

Suddenly, last month, the presses were stopped. Perhaps, given the interrelation of things, the fact that the ruling party was having some intra-mural difficulties is the cause of it. Perhaps somebody wanted to give somebody else a bloody nose. Perhaps signals were transmitted. The honourable High Court, which could not, in the course of six and a half long years, spare the time to deal with the case, agreed to a hearing; wonder of wonders, the advocate representing the Reserve Bank of India was the one who was the most vociferous in urging for the immediate vacation of the injunction, and the honourable High Court readily agreed. For Thine is the Kingdom.

There are of course going to be appeals lodged on behalf of the company to the Division Bench of the High Court, and perhaps subsequently to the Supreme Court. Now that the lid is seemingly off, there would be allegations and counter-allegations on where the culpability for all that has happened lies, and there would be the standard grinding of political axes. The confidential inspection report on the company prepared by the lower echelons of the Reserve Bank of India in 1979 was hawked around in newspaper offices during all these years; few newspapers would touch it even with a bargepole. Now these newspapers would roar like lions.

It is all part of the theatre of the vulgar. How many among the newspapers, their bravado of investigative journalism notwithstanding, would dare to demand an enquiry into how that curious order could emanate from the Reserve Bank of India in 1973, the order which is at the root of the ruination of

hundreds of thousands of poor families across the length and breadth of the country? How many among the members of Parliament, irrespective of their political affiliation, would, you think, be persuaded to demand such an enquiry? In this great land of ours, where Truth, on account of our insistence, shall always prevail, corruption is a great leveller.

APRIL, 1986

## THE SQUARE IS ALSO THE CIRCLE

We are supposed not to criticize a judge and question his motives. We are, however, at liberty to question his judgement. That is to say, we cannot call him a crook and a rogue; but we are free to describe the ruling he hands down as beneath contempt. Other fine distinctions are on the anvil. A judge may have cut corners while submitting, let us say, his expense accounts. That by itself does not apparently cast any shadow on his judicial integrity which is to be distinguished from his personal integrity. Before he is cast out, it must be proved that he is wont to deliver judgements at a consideration; that he pilfers government of expenses is apparently a minor matter.

Such are the breathtaking advances in metaphysical awareness. It is most improper to quote the kerb-side comments on a judge, or to dismiss whether he could be purchased with a currency notes, or whether the amount to be offered to him should be in the neighbourhood of rupees one lakh or rupees five lakh, or whether the money must be reached to his chamber or his home. Themes of this nature are not permitted to be discussed, or are to be discussed only in non-specific terms. We must therefore be careful not to transmit the gossip concerning a high court judge who, on the day of his retirement, sitting in session between two and four in the afternoon, issued twenty-two different injunctions, *suo motu*, against the state government. Lawyers and others knowledgeable in these matters were

understanding; the judge, after all, had to make some provision for his youngest son, who was still in college. We must not condemn the judge, or even hint that he deserves to be proceeded against on grounds of corruption. That does not mean that we should be bound by any constraints while criticizing any of the twenty-two injunctions he had slapped down in such a scampering hurry.

These metaphysical distinctions we are permitted as prerogatives of living. The charm of our republic lies in its ability to accommodate all faiths and all positions. It is the same parliament, but while one political party is the recognized opposition in the Lok Sabha, another one is accorded that privilege in the Rajya Sabha. There is little percentage in saying that this is ridiculous. The presiding officer in one house went by the information formally communicated to him by the president of the republic; the presiding officer in the other house, who is also the nation's vice-president, follows his own procedure, he chooses to go by official legal advice before deciding on this ticklish issue. To question the credentials of the legal officer he chooses to lean upon will be not good manners either. Given the continuum of our culture spanning beyond five thousand years, whatever the reality, certain civilities are to be maintained. After all, do not we describe ourselves as a secular republic? Or a socialist republic? Pretences make a civilization. You have no business to call a judge a knave or a villain; you have every business to criticize, to your heart's content, his judgements. You can remove overnight the incumbent Governor of the Reserve Bank, and put in the slot a particular civil servant favoured by x, y or z. Our newspapers, however, are saturated with civilization; not one of them will ask questions regarding who goes and why, or who comes and why. We cherish the basic freedoms, which include the freedom to improvise with our logic. Others are learning fast from the examples we are setting. Life, according to the current leadership of the country known as the Soviet Union, is not worth living unless the command system is

dismantled and replaced by an out and out free market economy. Like the Republic of India, they too, however, would like to continue describing themselves as a condominium of socialist republics. They have, with great sobriety, liquidated at one go the socialist edifice built through decades and decades of sustained efforts. But there is, they have decided, little harm in calling unabashed capitalism 'socialism'.

Such are the aspects of beatitude flowing from an arrangement completely free of any moral commitments. It makes it easy to transgress the barriers of rationality. A is also not-A, you cannot prove it otherwise. It is on the strength of the written commitment of support on the part of a political party that the president of the republic allowed a motley crowd of politicians to form the country's government. That party, however, does not relish being described as the party of government. It wants, there is no question, to shore up the government; it also wants to be officially designated as the principal opposition. Legal opinion is to be tapped to provide justification for whatever apparent absurdities one desires. Occasionally, though one may travel towards commissioning a judgement – mind you commissioning a judgement, not commanding a judge – to buttress a specific claim. The judge will not perhaps even mind delivering a judgement which is a three-in-one; that is to say, he will not mind playing the roles simultaneously of prosecutor, jury and executor. Freedom is as freedom does.

It is pointless to comment that the emerging circumstances induce nausea. A few individuals in the Soviet Union too might nurture similar thoughts. They might dearly love to return to the darkness of the Stalinist era. They are likely to be placed in a gulag, freshly done up. It is a topsy-turvy arrangement; those who ought to be inside an asylum are out, those who ought to be out are in. Socialism is non-socialism, mayhem is justice. Any advice from legal and constitutional experts can be commandeered to prove that such indeed is the lie of the land. Should you not

agree, you will not be allowed to walk out of the republic, you will be put in an asylum, or shot as a terrorist. Those who deserve to be shot do the actual shooting. No judicial remedy against such shootings is conceivable once the Armed Forces Special Powers Act is allowed its head. While a judge is not purchasable, the judgement he delivers can be coloured. The government knows how to do the colouring. *Ex post*, you and I can criticize the judgement; we are welcome to do so.

It is an endless merry-go-round. The same set of civil servants and advisers who connived at selling the country down the drain and watched benignly as the nation's external indebtedness rose from Rs 25,000 crore to Rs 35,000 crore, to Rs 50,000 crore to Rs 75,000 crore, to Rs 1,00,000 crore and now perhaps to Rs 1,50,000 crore, continue as if they have not a care in the world. They go together with the politicians; in morbid literature, such an arrangement is dubbed as class affinity. The country is bankrupt, so what, that situation will not affect *their* style or *their* standard of living. They will simply don the mantle of honest brokers and negotiate with the International Monetary Fund for a desperate line of credit. The terms the Fund sets will be harsh and humiliating. The terms the western governments have set for President Gorbachev are equally harsh and humiliating. He does not mind those terms; the free market bliss, he realizes, is unattainable without a final tremendous act of sacrifice. Gorbachev does not mind turning into a good boy and capitulating; why should we mind then? Certainly our politicians do not particularly mind, nor our civil servants. The politicians, who presided over official affairs while our foreign debt zoomed upward, way upward like a Polaris missile, are still very much around. They would not mind selling the country down the drain, although they would call it by another name. Their folly or worse, does not reduce their being to nothingness. They claim to constitute the principal opposition; they are also, in effect, the government.

We thus take to multiple role-playing as duck takes to water. Whether we do it at a consideration is beside the point. There is in any case that wise old edict: everything in life has a price. That is the free market economy for you. Things are up for sale to the highest bidder, a court judgement, a politician's or a civil servant's scruples, the definition of socialism, the credentials of a patriot. That apart, all our doings are misdoings, we commiserate with ourselves, are for the sake of the future generation. It is to provide for his offspring still in college that, according to apocrypha, the high court judge, on the day he is retiring, issues twenty-two injunctions at one go. It is for the sake of ensuring the nation's bright and beautiful future – booming exports, accelerated rate of growth and so on – that we walk into a debt trap. Or we betray the people's mandate and become proxy prime minister on behalf of someone who had been rejected by the electorate. It will be sedition though to talk of walking out of such a republic. They entered the necessary amendments in the Soviet Constitution fairly early, and, perestroika or no perestroika, President Gorbachev is fighting his last-ditch battle. Some of us pretend that we have inspired him. At least he should inspire us, and that will be no pretence. Simranjit Singh Mann will negotiate with the government much in the manner of a foreign plenipotentiary and he will keep referring to Article 51 of our Constitution which talks of our government's international obligations. The prime minister will, however, continue assuring the rest of the countrymen that the nation's unity and integrity will not be compromised in the course of the negotiations with the Punjab insurgents. A is also not-A. The square is also the circle. Our ambassador in the United States is supposed to look after our interests vis-à-vis that country; he is equally enthusiastic, or even more so, to advance American economic interests against our own. He had grasped the nettle of A being, at the same time not-A.

JANUARY, 1991

### THE POINT OF EXIT

It all depends on which turf you choose for yourself. The chief election commissioner can be invested with accolades for being the Great Saviour, engaged in a last ditch effort to salvage whatever remains of parliamentary democracy in the country. Or he may, with legitimacy, be regarded as a top secret agent working on behalf of, first, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and second, all who would like to make a comprehensive bonfire of the Indian Republic. The rest of the country can have elections, Tamil Nadu does not quite belong; if Christ stopped at Eboli, the ambit of the Representation of the People's Act, (the nation is being confidentially informed) is assumed to stop at about where North Acrot perhaps begins. There is of course scope for differing with this formulation. When the chips are down, every Tamil citizen, it could be maintained, will turn into a dessicated calculating machine; the external economies of being a part of the great spoils system which is India are not to be scoffed at. Is not such an argument however, excessively, elitist? Has not romantic imagination spawned by Gemini Studios succeeded in convincing the faithful masses to steer clear of the manner in which the young men and women in the north-east are currently behaving. Or the young men and women and oldies in Kashmir. That would hardly be the end of the story, but the beginning. Conceivably some existing blueprints are, at this very moment, being drawn up. The K.P.S.

Gills, for all we know, could be persuaded to leave the allure of Punjab temporarily behind and join to serve a greater, nobler national cause. The Khalistanis have been denied Punjab; the Eelam fanatics ought, much at the same manner, be denied Tamil Nadu, or so it is being planned. The crucial question would never go begging: why unleash the chief election commissioner on Tamil Nadu at this unseasonal juncture; what is the nature of the moral compulsion?

Questions of this nature are always difficult to field. Certain impulses operate altogether in an autonomous fashion, responding to neither rhyme nor reason, refusing to obey the law laid down by a central nervous system. Why, for example, did the politicians in command in the nation's capital conclude way back in 1980 that a Bhindranwale was to be preferred to the Akalis? Why was it thought so eminently sensible in 1984 to sabotage a democratically elected National Conference regime in Kashmir and thereby set in motion the processes of anarchy that have now engulfed the valley? Or why not go back to the prehistoric fifties? Who amongst the supposedly smarter ones in South Block went gaga over the Nagas and authored the policy of pacification, meaning the placement of a permanent army of occupation across the hills and tracts of the Seven Sisters? If such questions tire one out, the gaze can be turned to more mundane prospects. Here is a sample: why must the Swedish arms fabricating company feel obliged to make payments into a Swiss bank account held in the name of a certain Italian gentleman apropos of a contract it had signed with the Government of India? What, in other words, is the nexus between precipitation in Karachi and a good harvest in Chittagong?

The answers to the queries are always murky. The man on the street is therefore left to his own devices; he fills in the blanks according to his own whims. If you would want to dub this propensity as anarchic or even nihilistic, please go ahead; the choice is very much yours, India is formally still a free country.

At least you are still allowed the liberty of free-swinging associations of thought. In the view of some earnest citizens, there is therefore no question of going gentle in the night; let everybody better continue to rage and rage before the dying of day. In other words, these earnest citizens make their choice. The modalities they opt for vary, much like the diverse languages they speak. They are adamant to prove a simple, but essential point: New Delhi is no longer India, New Delhi's writ has ceased to determine India. Despite prime ministers and home ministers and national integration councils and chief election commissioners, the country has already been rendered into a true federal entity, and the federating units are each greater than the whole. One can, for the purpose of satisfying one's ego, pretend to adhere to the anachronism of democratic centralism. Clichés, however, have had their day. Neither do stratagems a prime minister latches on to demonstrate his majority support in parliament connote much of democracy. Nor are blandishments of a chief election commissioner even marginally capably of enforcing centralism. Even the time to say hurry up, it is time, is past. The young men and women concerned will accordingly not lack justifications for being on the rampage in the different parts of what, on account of the inertia of the United Nations and its specialized agencies, will continue to be described as India. None will seriously demur if an alternative name, for instance, Hades, is suggested. The more liberal minded will be inclined to quote Shakespeare; they will be snubbed in the nick of time, clichés are *verboten*.

Such circumstances notwithstanding, or precisely because of such circumstances, the absurd country may yet survive, but just barely. This could happen since the world's only superpower would not make up its mind. The temptation to rush back to Shakespeare – if you have tears, prepare to shed them, now, etcetera – will be intense. That will be paying homage to another cliché. The superpower is nonetheless in a major jam. The

textbooks are informative enough regarding the mechanics of monopolization. This explains, equally lucidly, the conditions of monopoly equilibrium. What ensues though in Afterlife? The superpower is perched on the ultimate peak, all competition has ceased, the world henceforth consists of thousands and thousands of Boris Yeltsins and just one stray Fidel Castro. Even so, and despite the parametric values of the variables of the system being known in such thorough detail, afterlife remains clouded by grave uncertainties. Monopolization is of little avail, the world's only superpower is unable to climb out of either unemployment or demand recession. The superpower carries enormous clout, the degree of monopoly it enjoys is absolute. That makes it even more wobbly in every big or little step it takes. Despite its being the only superpower in the neighbourhood, it dares not take any big steps, confining itself to empty bluster and minor pin-pricks. Innovations and initiatives are not its cup of tea. The servility of third world finance ministers is therefore somewhat bereft of a context. History may or may not have reached a dead end; colonialism apparently has, at the very moment the rest of the world has been converted into one seemingly interminable stretch of a colony belonging to the superpower. We stumble here on the contradiction. Colonies are for rape and exploitation. The superpower, however, appears to have forgotten the script. Or, rather, somebody, who ought to know better, has forgotten to write the script. Neo-colonies such as India are dying to present their credentials and faithfully serve the master. The superpower has other things on its mind. Selling a stray cryogenic rocket deal, and forcing a country to forgo the pretensions of an independent foreign or defence policy are hardly worth writing home about. These are trivialities. The superpower cannot settle its principal agenda. It has, till now underwritten the living standards of the top one or two per cent of the colony's wretched populace. This practice, however, only ensures an unstable equilibrium; the vast majority of the colony's

populace is likely, sooner or later, to protest against such discrimination. Considerable mechanical engineering will be called for to forestall that prospect. Huge quantities of capital will need to be invested before the colony's stability can be taken for granted. Others can tear their hair, the superpower is in no hurry. It has not only set for itself other priorities; it has been unable to finalize its view on whether this particular supplicant of a colony is deserving of underwriting in its present state, or whether it should be allowed to disintegrate. Decisions on such matters are not readily forthcoming. The superpower is taking its time to get used to the notion of its exclusivity. On the other hand, it is not altogether sure that, once it declares its lack of interest in the colony, a China or a Japan might not be tempted to indulge in some monkey tricks. We are once more referred back to the dog eared economics text books; it is an echo of the Cobweb phenomenon, a minor imbalance in the central metabolism instantaneously transmits explosive messages to far-out dependent categories. They are dependent, but their candidature for the status of full-fledged colonies is yet to be examined. It is a frustrating situation; forces, sinister or otherwise, try to take advantage. Chief election commissioners assume their role to be that of major league players. They are actually minor hacks. The decisions and non-decisions are reached roughly ten thousand miles away. In this instance, at least, everything happens according to a script.

Shakespeare remains a menace though; in a sense, his is the trusted colonial heritage. The queen my lord, is dead. Ah is she? Queens are dime a dozen, and they keep dying all over. Ceremonial funerals are out, the royal corpses, robbed of their regality, absent-mindedly pile up on the pavement. Whether this qualifies as a tragedy depends on one's perspective. According to some versions, the queen may not quite be dead; writhing in agony, she could yet be vaguely hoping, even as she slips into decisive unconsciousness, that perhaps, even at this forlorn hour,

the king will dispatch the royal physician to do a miracle with her body. Amendment: the queen, my lord, is not dead; she is in her last throes. Both the spectacle and the message lack in dignity; they are distinctly off-colour. Obscenity, however, is the wages optimism pays to experience: for, once upon a time, one had cherished hopes – and built dreams.

The royal physician is not a-coming; the king has other chores to tend to. Or maybe the king has already dispensed with the royal physician, and with the royal astrologer too for that matter. What happens, nonetheless, to dreams? Should those too be adjourned, or dubbed as false alternatives? Should or should not one move away from the parroting that there are no true alternatives? The double bind persists. It could be argued, the issue is not to poke fun at, but believe in, alternatives. It is akin to believing in an ideology. An ideology is not tarnished because it has been mishandled or misinterpreted. The mal-practitioners receive, in due season, their just rewards. Once the season terminates, there ought to be a return to the original question and the ideology it was wrapped in. Current prime ministers and incumbent chief election commissioners are reduced to irrelevance in that context. Just as there has to be a life beyond for the superpower, the nation too would live once such specimens wear themselves out. There is a case for shooting the piano-player, in case that is the only way to save the piano from irretrievable damage – and the purity of the score. The point can be made even more emphatically by recourse to an obtuse example. One does not throw away Cecil Day Lewis's poetry, which invokes camaraderie and the revolution merely because his offspring appears in pornographic films.

Have your choice. Treat the ravings above as a status report; alternatively, as the point of exit.

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